

Mirage of Blaze: To You, My Beloved

Kuwabara Mizuna

To You, My Beloved Chapter 1: The Lady in White

The cars moving along the highway had turned on their lights perhaps an hour ago. By the time they arrived in [Uozu City](#) , [Toyama Prefecture](#) , it was already fully dark.

"Where are we now...?" Takaya asked from the passenger seat, rubbing his eyes and looking around. He'd fallen asleep, but had probably been awakened by the glare from the headlights of the oncoming cars.

"We're finally in [Uozu City](#) . Are you awake?"

"Mmm, yeah..."

The ride had been so quiet that he had unintentionally dozed off. Naoe was driving a Celsior this time; he had evidently recalled a comment from Takaya about wanting to ride in one. Actually, Takaya had been hoping Naoe would come in the Benz, but the Tachibana family had apparently placed some stringent restrictions on his car usage after the wreckage of his Cefiro in [Yamagata](#) .

Now he was barred from taking them even when he was traveling afar, Naoe lamented. Not, of course, without reason. Takaya certainly sympathized with Naoe's family, so even while he harbored a secret desire for a ride in the Tachibanas' Ferrari Testarossa, he'd made no complaints about a rental car.

Naoe glanced at the time and inquired, "You must be hungry. Shall we stop for a bite to eat somewhere?"

"I'm fine, unless it's better to eat before getting to wherever it is we're going?"

"Not really, but I believe it would be better to get there a little later... I do know of a wonderful restaurant along the way—shall we stop there?"

"Sure," Takaya agreed, eyeing Naoe, who seemed more relaxed today than usual. He certainly had no objections to good food. Naoe appeared to know the area quite well, and navigated its roads and highways with easy familiarity.

He had invited Takaya on this trip to Uozu three days after their return from [Nara](#) .

"Has something happened?" Takaya had asked anxiously, but it didn't appear to be anything urgent. Naoe had only replied that he wanted Takaya to accompany him on a trip.

[Toyama Prefecture](#) , [Uozu City](#) . Called [Ecchuu](#) during the [Sengoku](#) Period, it had held deep connections to the Uesugi Clan as one of the provinces bordering [Echigo](#) . That was probably part of the reason Naoe had brought Takaya here.

There were people he wanted Takaya to meet—was all he had said.

They had dinner at the restaurant Naoe mentioned and finished at around eight-thirty. As they headed back to the car, Naoe said to the

satisfied-looking Takaya walking next to him, "You seem to have enjoyed the food."

"Yeah. I love sashimi. [Matsumoto](#) has its [basashi](#) , but since it's in the mountains, fish is harder to come by..."

"Oh? In that case we should come again in December. The seafood is delicious enough to make you shiver. Toyama is famous for its trout sushi, but its fish and crab are simply superb. Shall I bring you back to try them?"

"Would you really? Oooh, lucky! Good food, a full night's sleep—that's when you really feel grateful to be alive, right?"

Chuckling at Takaya's enthusiasm, Naoe started the car.

"Our destination is about five minutes from here. It's a good time to head over."

Takaya gave Naoe a blank look, recalling that he hadn't yet heard the reason for this trip. There was no way they had come all this way to eat fish.

"Who are these people you want me to meet?"

Naoe answered, smiling, "You'll know quite soon."

Their destination turned out to be an elementary school near the [Uozu Electric Railway Station](#) . Alighting in front of the school, Naoe easily unlocked the gates with [nendouryoku](#) , and the two of them stepped inside. A stone plaque engraved with the words "[Uozu Castle Ruins](#)" stood in front of the entrance. Takaya's sixth sense tingled at the change in the

atmosphere.

"This is—"

"The former site of [Uozu Castle](#) .

This elementary school was built right where the main citadel once stood." Noticing Takaya's wariness as he looked around at their surroundings, Naoe added, "You feel it, don't you?"

"What the heck is this place? It's crawling with spiritual energy..."

"Influence from the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>, I would guess. The [onshou](#) must be moving in the area as well, provoking the spirits here."

"You mean the spirits of the people who were killed here?"

"Yes," Naoe replied, beckoning Takaya towards the back of the campus.

"This castle once belonged to the Uesugi Clan—the strategic base from which Uesugi invaded [Ecchuu -Noto](#) .

Lord Kenshin would pay a visit to it during every campaign," he explained, coming to a stop beneath the pine tree standing next to the gates of the school's kindergarten building. Another stone plaque, this one bearing a [tanka](#) poem, rested at its roots.

"The warrior makes of his armor a pillow for his head alone: a solitary repose. The first wild geese cry nearby..." Lord Kenshin composed this poem here. He fought many fierce battles over [Ecchuu](#) , and at one time managed to bring the entire region under Uesugi control. But Lord Kenshin's sudden death soon after, followed by the [Otate no Ran](#) , plunged [Ecchuu](#) into chaos and allowed Oda to slip through

and begin its recapture."

Takaya grimaced. Naoe glanced at him and added, "Though that is probably a painful tale for you."

"No... it's okay. Go on."

Naoe took up the story again at Takaya's urging. "With your death putting an end to the battle for succession, Lord Kagekatsu took the field to recover [Ecchuu](#) . This castle became the all-important front-line base for both Uesugi's control of [Ecchuu](#) and defense of [Echigo](#) . The Oda forces put everything they had into their assault against it."

He looked at Takaya.

"[Sassa Narimasa](#) ...was one of those commanders. He was ordered by his master Nobunaga to take control of [Ecchuu](#) , and appeared determined to drive the Uesugi out under any circumstances."

"..."

"The Oda contrived to have Lord Kagekatsu receive word that [Shinano](#) 's [Mori Nagayoshi](#) had invaded [Echigo](#) , which left him no choice but to return to [Kasugayama](#) . Unable to send reinforcements to [Uozu Castle](#) , the Uesugi commanders and soldiers there were told to surrender the castle—but they refused, and continued to resist the besieging army."

Naoe gazed at the dark shapes of the school buildings.

"[Uozu Castle](#) ...fell. The three thousand soldiers of the castle garrison died in battle, and its seventeen^[1] Uesugi commanders committed ritual suicide in the ruins of the inner

citadel... Ironically, this was the day before Nobunaga died at [Honnou](#)

Temple ."

Takaya stared at him. Naoe's eyes fell slightly.

"The Oda army withdrew with its troops in confusion, allowing Uesugi to recover the castle, though too late to save those sacrificed soldiers. Fate's sense of irony is far too cruel; if they had endured but a few days longer, they may yet have been saved..."

Pale phosphorous lights began to dance in the dark courtyard.

"The souls of Uozu Castle 's three thousand fallen sleep here."

Takaya froze. His breath caught as ghostly energy roused across the entire campus. He could hear the chiming of a bell.

"Naoe. That sound..."

"It is the 'Bell of Spiritual Repose.' She is coming."

A human shape appeared out of a mist of smoke-dark spiritual energy. Its features gradually gained clarity as it approached them, resolving at last into a woman with long hair, dressed in a white kimono. She appeared before Takaya and Naoe with a small bell in her right hand.

"She is the tutelary deity of this land—we call her the 'Lady in White'." She has pacified the spirits of Uozu Castle ."



The ephemeral 'Lady in White' stilled the bell in her hand and kneeled, bowing respectfully to Takaya.

"Please answer her greeting. You are her master. She, too, is a member of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) ."

"She is? But she's not [kanshousha](#) ."

"The [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) is composed of all the spirits who have some connection to the Uesugi upon whom Lord Kenshin has laid his claim. We the [Yasha-shuu](#) could be called their commanders."

"Then they're also—" Takaya gazed at the host of countless wraiths filling the schoolyard. Behind the 'Lady in White' stood the commanders who had committed seppuku in this place, Uesugi's Thirteen Generals.

"They became [onryou](#) after their deaths. But they heeded the summons of Lord Kenshin, God of War, to join the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) , and were thus

reclaimed. They usually sleep quietly on this land, but once given the command, they will fight for us. You are the only person with the authority to lead them."

Takaya gazed at the 'Lady in White' kneeling gracefully before him, then at the spirits gathered in the courtyard all around him.

"We have many such people in place all over the land, a system of guardian spirits like the 'Lady in White' who relay the movements of the local [onshou](#) back to us. They are the reason that we have an idea of the activity of the entire <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>.

But of late there have been many cases of formerly pacified spirits being agitated and roused by the maneuverings of the [onshou](#) .

—Though the guardians of the land can usually keep them quiet, there have also been times when they can no longer keep the spirits under control."

As Naoe had pointed out, Takaya could sense that the aura of these spirits was indeed much stronger than that of ordinary [onryou](#) . Realization dawned.

"So we came here to pacify them?"

"This is also one of our jobs. It is our duty to keep them from wrecking havoc in ordinary people's lives."

Takaya still looked uncertain. Naoe gave him a sideways glance, then approached the 'Lady in White'.

"Then again, it's certainly true that this area has always been known for its ghost legends. ...Now, Kagetora-sama."

Takaya walked up to Naoe as one after another the Thirteen Generals exclaimed in wonder. He stood still within the crowd of spirits, opening himself to their fellowship, respect, love...

Terashima Nagasuke , Sanbonji Kagenaga , Takenomata Yoshitsuna , Yoshie Nobukage ...

Their names flowed one by one into his mind. And his heart heard, along with those names, their tales of valor in the ferocious Battle of Uozu Castle .

With no provisions left and their wounded bodies on the edge of starvation, they had yet kept the onslaught of Oda soldiers at bay. They had fought like demons, surrounded by corpses and severed limbs and howls of agony, with blood soaking through the floorboards beneath their feet.

Under siege...All of them had wept at Kagekatsu's letter carrying the bitter news that no reinforcements would come. Though Kagekatsu asked them to surrender, his letter only hardened their resolve to fight on.

How could they possibly have capitulated, knowing what unspeakably deep

pain Kagekatsu must have felt as he had written the words, *Forgive me for abandoning you...*

Standing silent and still, his eyes lowered, Takaya took in all their emotions. The <<Yami-Sengoku >> had revived their ancient regret, and they had waited. Waited for him,

lost for thirty years, to appear like this before them. Waited for him as they had waited four hundred years ago for Kagekatsu, who had neve

arrived to save them.

He began the spirit-tranquilization ceremony. He had to put them to sleep for now, for a little while longer. Naoe handed him a charm of [Dainichi Nyorai](#) , which he placed gently on the ground. He pressed his hands together around a [tokko vajra](#) and slowly chanted the Mantra of Glory.

"[On abokyabeiroshanau makabodara manihandoma jinbaraharabaritaya un .](#)"

Takaya's body began to glow with a pale light. His mantra calmed the chaotic spiritual energy around him. Naoe, holding a Buddhist rosary, chanted the [Heart Sutra](#) in counterpoint to Takaya's Mantra of Glory. Pure air enfolded the

space around them. Their sonorous voices almost seemed to meld together

in a single song, resonating in the darkness of the [Uozu Castle-ruins](#) .

The 'Bell of Spiritual Repose' chimed.

The [tokko](#) in Takaya's hand released a golden light as his voice swelled with the

Buddha's name. He held it towards the charm in a gesture of offering, and the charm slowly floated into mid-air. The Sanskrit characters written upon it glittered, then blazed with a gentle, pure light that fell like rain onto the spirits.

It acted as a kind of soporific. The generals absorbed that purifying light and disappeared one by one. They would sleep again until the day

Kagetora summoned them.

"...Gyateigyatei haragyatei harasougyatei bojisowaka hannyashingyou ..."

At the conclusion of their mantras, the 'Lady in White' swung her bell three times. White fire soundlessly engulfed the charm, which fell to the ground in a scattering of ash. The spirit-tranquilization ceremony concluded, the 'Lady in White' also vanished. Naoe ascertained that all the soldiers of Uozu Castle were quiet before parting his hands and turning to Takaya.

"They seem to have calmed."

"Yeah..."

"The ghost disturbances should now cease as well. I believe there have been quite a few of them in the area lately, such as warriors' spirits walking around the school and frequent ghost sightings... I'm glad you came. It would probably have taken a considerable amount of time to calm them by myself."

Naoe lighted the incense bundle he had brought with him and placed it on the ground.

Takaya was still staring dazedly at the dark schoolyard.

"Shall we go, Takaya-san?"

"Ah...yeah..."

Takaya turned from the now-quiet grounds at Naoe's urging and began

walking away. But he could still somehow feel the sorrowful gaze of the 'Lady in White' upon him. His feet stopped abruptly.

They had waited for him here...

"I—..." Takaya murmured softly, turning back to the schoolyard. "I will not abandon you..."

Naoe stopped and stared at him, eyes widening slightly. These were the same words spoken by Kagetora to the [Uozu Castle](#) soldiers each time he came here.

It was not the sutra-chanting or the spirit-tranquilization ceremony that comforted them; perhaps these few words from the heart were all that they really wished for.

The wraiths of the castle ruins settled into sleep once more, their minds at peace.

The elementary school stood by the coast, with the [Sea of Japan](#) only a short walk away. Uozu was the entrance to [Toyama Bay](#) , and on clear days commanded a view of the distant [Noto Peninsula](#) .

Takaya and Naoe drove to the coastline next to a fishing harbor. The wind carried to them the scent of the tide as they alighted from the car. Glittering stars filled the expanse of the night sky, and the dark ocean stretched out before them. High schoolers were setting off fireworks in the plaza of a warehouse-like building across the way.

"Delinquents getting rowdy, huh?"

Sipping from a can of juice, Takaya climbed onto the seawall and sat down with his legs extended out towards the sea.

"Be careful."

"I'm fine, I'm fine." Gazing at the waves breaking against the concrete [tetrapod](#) blocks, Takaya murmured slowly, "Ah... I wonder how long it's been since I last saw the sea..."

Naoe stood quietly at Takaya's side in the sea breeze, gazing out at the coast.

"I believe you can see mirages here from spring until early summer.

They say that the buildings move from the opposite shore to the coast, but I have not yet seen it myself. I've heard that it's somewhat confusing for those seeing it for the first time, so they often mistake it for the [Noto Peninsula](#), but apparently it's not possible to see the peninsula and the mirage at the same time."

"Hmm," Takaya responded with bright-eyed interest, "I'd really like to see that sometime. You can't see it now?"

"It's the middle of summer, so I'm not sure. Evidently it happens during the firefly squid's harvest season... But you wouldn't be able to see it at night in any case," Naoe said, turning to the road at the sound of several car engines roaring to life. The group of kids from the warehouse raced off with horns blaring.

"Goddammit, shut the hell up already! Drive if you're gonna drive, but

at least do it quietly!" Takaya yelled, and Naoe smiled wryly. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Just wondering if I should be saying the same to you."

"Hey, I've got a muffler on mine! And who the hell would hang around a tacky crowd like that, anyway? Ugh!" Takaya's lips twisted as if he were truly peeved. "The only time I rode with someone was...for a little while in junior high."

He abruptly turned away from Naoe back to the ocean. "Stop making me remember stuff like that." He gulped down the juice with frightful speed and held the empty can out to Naoe behind him.

"Beer."

"Excuse me...?"

"Go buy some. And get some snacks while you're at it."

"What are you talking about? You know I can't."

"Oh come on, how often do we come to the sea?"

Sensing Naoe's wry smile, Takaya turned crossly.

"See? You're giving me that smile again. You keep treating me like a kid."

"I don't treat you like a kid. I treat you like someone who is still underage."

"Same difference," Takaya retorted, and turned again to glower at the sea.

Both of them listened to the sound of the waves for a while. Takaya seemed to be thinking of his junior high days.

"I guess I was pretty messed up..."

The mumbled words suddenly spilled from Takaya's lips, and Naoe peered at him curiously.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing, I was just remembering..." Takaya brushed his hair out of his eyes and wrapped his arms around one upraised knee. "In junior high I stole a motorcycle and took it joy-riding. I didn't know much about traffic regulations, so I just went any which way I wanted. But it felt great, you know? One small rev of the engine was all took to put another few hundred kilometers of the world behind me. That kinda power gives you the delusion that you're strong. Everything around me just blurred on past. I couldn't see anything, since it was night, and that was great, too. I really thought that I might hit something and die right there on the spot, and I didn't care."

"..."

"Cause at that point I couldn't see any sort of future in front of me.

I had no hope of anything. It was just like my ride: a headlong plunge into the dark. And I thought, if I hit something, it'd only take a second..."

Staring a little at Takaya's face in profile with its mixture of nostalgia and amusement, Naoe's emotions suddenly softened into

tenderness. He wanted to see more of the true self of this young man called Ougi Takaya.

"Takaya-san, what sort of occupation do you want to pursue for the future?"

"Me?" Takaya hesitated, then answered haltingly, "Family court counseling..."

"Huh?" the startled question slipped involuntarily out of Naoe's mouth. "Family court...?"

"Something wrong with that?"

"Not at all," Naoe replied, looking completely nonplussed. Takaya career choice seemed rather drastically at odds with his projected image.

"Ah, but it's probably totally impossible for me anyway. I'm too dumb for it... That's the sort of job you've gotta have brains for..."

"I don't...think that's true..."

"Hmph, don't force yourself," Takaya returned peevishly, staring fixedly at the sea. Naoe wanted to ask him the reason for his career choice, but Takaya muttered to himself as if to forestall his question, "Though I guess this isn't really the time to be thinking about stuff like that."

"... Takaya-san."

The waves murmured sweetly into their ears. Takaya seemed absorbed in

his thoughts as he gazed out to the dark sea. But as Naoe was about to speak to him, Takaya mumbled haltingly, "Don't you...think it's odd?"

"Eh?"

With eyes downcast, Takaya answered, "Those people, is it okay to keep them there like that...?"

"Those people?"

"The people of Uozu Castle .

Isn't it painful for them to remain in this world? I was wondering if we shouldn't send them to the next world as soon as we can..."

Takaya brushed the wind-blown hair out of his eyes. "I don't get this Kenshin guy. He says stuff about spirits violating the natural order of the world, but on the other hand *he's* forcing them to stay. It'd be better if he makes them pass on and be purified and reincarnated or whatever. If he's gonna say anything about the natural order..." he muttered, his tone growing more forceful. "If you think about it, aren't we the ones violating the natural order? The kanshousha keep living and living by snatching other people's bodies—I mean, we're the ones smashing the natural order all to pieces. Talk about contradiction. I think we're a lot more unnatural than the onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>."

Naoe was silent.

"Who the hell is this Kenshin, anyway? What authority does he have over who stays or goes? We should just perform <<choubuku >> on those

people too! I don't know anything about this [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) or whatever the hell it is, but who the hell are we to call them up at our convenience? If we've got the power to exorcise spirits, then let's let them rest! Let them pass on to the other world, not sacrifice them! That's what I think we should do, anyway."

"Takaya-san..."

"That's why we have this power, isn't it? Who's being self-serving here? I just don't get Kenshin..." he trailed off, closing his eyes hard and biting down on his lower lip as if to hold back the rest of his words.

"I just wanna...let them rest in peace as soon as I can..."

A pang ran through Naoe's chest. But he held it back from his eyes as he said to Takaya's back, "It's true."

The lapping of waves against the shore rippled across the silence. "We all live within that contradiction."

Takaya lifted his head and turned.

"... Naoe..."

"But I'm glad of it. If Lord Kenshin had not called me, I would certainly still be wandering as an [onryou](#) in the darkness, ignorant of all but my hatred. And —" his gaze went to Takaya "—if I had not performed [kanshou](#) , I would never have had the chance to come to understand you like this."

Takaya's eyes widened. Naoe's quiet smile finally reappeared.

"If Lord Kenshin had not chosen me as one of the [Yasha-shuu](#) , you would never have been more to me than my "enemy of the [Otate no Ran](#) . And I would never have been able to stand at your side."

"You..."

"I am grateful to Lord Kenshin for choosing as your protector."

The sincerity in Naoe's clear eyes disconcerted Takaya, and he turned away in flustered bewilderment.

"You...you're really weird, you know that? Talking to you always throws me for a loop."

"Does it?"

"That's...that's the kind of sweet-talk you'd feed to a girl, isn't it?!"

"I am only putting my sincerity into words."

"And how many women have you put the moves on with that sincerity of yours?"

Naoe thought about it for a bit, straight-faced. "Well, let's see... How many has it been? I've lost track, really..."

"Geez, you know..." Takaya's fist shook for a moment before he asked as if the thought had just struck him, "Speaking of which, you're still single, aren't you? You're not seeing anybody?"

"..."

Why did he have to ask such a question with such innocent obliviousness? Naoe grimaced.

"I don't...really have the time for that at the moment."

"So so so! That means you did?"

Looking at the young man with eyes glinting in his curiosity about another's private life, Naoe's eyes softened.

"There have been several women I've spent a night with."

"Huh?" Takaya looked at Naoe oddly. "You...don't tell me you're actually a wolf in sheep's clothing or something."

Standing in the night wind, Naoe smiled.

"But it never went beyond a practical arrangement for either side.

Neither party was looking for anything deeper, so we took only what we wanted and went our separate ways, and that was that. I'm sorry to disappoint your hopes of hearing a sweet tale of love and romance."

"Wh-who the hell wanted to hear something like that...?!"

Naoe laughed, and Takaya glowered, rather wishing that he hadn't asked in the first place. There were some things about which Takaya's views seemed unexpectedly puritanical; the glare he directed at Naoe held a trace of hostility. Perhaps he was yet at that age where he still reacted strongly against adult male-female relationships.

"You'll understand someday," Naoe said, looking out at the dark sea.

"There are times when you cannot live without relationships whose only objective is each other's bodies, when you seek the mutual, consensual

physical act of love in order to forget... And that was necessary for me, then..."

Takaya, who seemed not to have understood the feelings Naoe described at all, was still glaring fiercely at him.

"But then again, I'm always sincere in my pick-up lines," Naoe added half-jokingly, and Takaya abruptly turned his back.

"Yeah, whatever. So you're a real ladies' man. You'd better watch out, or the women you're feeding those lines'll totally take advantage of you."

The smile hovering at the corners of Naoe's mouth suddenly vanished, and Takaya, sensing it, stilled. Naoe murmured, his voice dropping, "I wouldn't mind being taken advantage of."

"..."

For a moment Takaya's face was completely open; then—

"I am *not* a woman!"

Thinking that Naoe was making fun of him, Takaya tried to stand up too quickly on the seawall and inexplicably lost his balance.

"Uwagh!"

Naoe caught hold of his arm even as he cried out in alarm, and the firm grip saved him from a headlong plunge into the sea. A glance at the billowing waves below was enough for him to break out into a cold sweat. He looked up at Naoe.

"Ah, thanks..."

"..."

The words died on Takaya's lips. Naoe's gaze on him was disconcertingly intense. Realizing that the grip on his arm was more forceful than necessary, Takaya asked uncertainly, "Naoe...?"

Realizing it himself, Naoe's eyes immediately softened with his gentle smile.

"Now you see why I can't leave you alone."

Annoyed, Takaya immediately began defending himself. Naoe, still smiling, listened patiently to Takaya's rebuttals as they returned to the car.

The sound of waves lapping against the shore accompanied them.

A car's engine rumbled on the wharf...



footnotes

[1] 17 is the number given in Naoe's tale, though 13 is the number given in the rest of the chapter and historically.



To You, My Beloved Chapter 2: The Legend of Sayuri

They stayed at a hotel in [Toyama City](#) that night. For the next two days they would be thoroughly canvassing the [Ecchuu](#) area for [onshou](#) activity. The Oda and the followers of the [Ikkou Sect](#) were currently glowering at each other in the [North-Central region](#). There had been skirmishes, but nothing eye-catching as of yet.

Takaya had grumbled about the hassle, but had consented to the plan as soon as Naoe had promised to treat him to three delicious seafood feasts. Now that he thought about it, the Kagetora of old had been partial to sashimi as well, oddly enough.

He was slightly concerned about the expense, but decided to view it as an investment in his lord, and did not neglect to make reservations (and in fact felt rather happy as he did so).

By the time he finished up at the front desk and returned to their room, Takaya was already dozing. The television was on; he had been watching the sports news after taking a shower, but it was already over, and the next program was now playing. An opened beer can stood on

the nightstand. (There he goes again...) Naoe shook his head, smiling wryly, and called, "Takaya-san. Takaya-san, please pull up a blanket if you're going to sleep, or you'll catch a cold. Takaya-san."

"Mmm—..." Takaya mumbled, stirring and turning over, but didn't open his eyes. He had not even put on the [yukata](#) laid out for him after his shower, and had only a towel draped across his shoulders. He would certainly feel

chilled soon.

"Takaya-san!" Naoe repeated in exasperation, but Takaya was already fast asleep. "Guess there's no help for it..." Naoe muttered, and lifted Takaya in his arms.

"Takaya-sa..."

His heart lurched.

Takaya's head tilted slightly back at the motion, and suddenly he was looking upon another time, a different scene. Naoe's heart gave one horrified wail, and he lost all composure. He shook Takaya wildly.

"Ta-Takaya-san! Please wake up! Takaya-san, Takaya-san!"

"Mmn—..." Takaya opened his eyes sluggishly and looked at him. "Huh? You're back?"

"If you're going to sleep, please put on your [yukata](#) and pull up a blanket, or you're going to catch a cold."

"[Chuunichi](#) and [Hiroshima](#) , who won...?"

"I have no idea."

"Mmmph," Takaya mumbled, crawling beneath the blankets still half-asleep, and immediately dropped back into a sound slumber. Abruptly drained of all energy, Naoe slumped onto the other bed. The noise of the TV intruded into his consciousness, and he shut it off from the switch beside the bed. The faint sound of cars passing by

outside was audible as quiet settled within the room.

He should have gotten them both singles, Naoe reflected. He exhaled deeply to calm himself.

(He is much too unguarded...) Naoe thought, turning the blame on Takaya, before picking up the half-finished can of beer next to him and taking a gulp. Takaya, completely unaware of Naoe's agitation, was soundly, sweetly asleep, his face as carefree and innocent as a child's. (Just looking at it is enough to make me happy...)

Such an unlikely description truly applied to Takaya's sleeping face, though to be told so would probably only anger him and land Naoe the accusation that he was treating Takaya not only like a child, but like a baby. But at least for now he was deep in slumber.

Naoe's eyes suddenly clouded over.

(He is frighteningly unguarded with those he trusts...)

That had always been the case. His complete lack of defense against those in whom he decided to place his trust had always worried Naoe. And the breadth and depth of his wound once betrayed was terrible to behold...

Yes, he had trusted Naoe.

How much time and struggle had it taken for two former adversaries to reach that point?

Kagetora, the general at the head of the enemy forces, whom he had driven to his death. How had Kagetora come to trust his despised foe...?

And—

When had he come to revere this man? His earnest gaze, his incisive, unyielding will, the keen sensitivity enfolding an easily-wounded heart...you, who are so much a double-edged sword...

Even as I blamed myself for the blade I once turned against you, the blade that resulted in your death, far stronger than the guilt I bore was my desire to protect you...

It had not taken so much time. And he had believed that his place would be at Kagetora's side for the whole of his existence. Had held it as his pride.

And yet that passion to protect had transformed into ugly ego...

The past still strangled his heart in rusted chains of memory.

(I never wanted to betray you.) Naoe stared down at his feet. (I simply could not bear to have you be stolen by anyone...)

He repeated the excuse he had told himself again and again as he gazed at Takaya's still form. He was here, now, where Naoe could touch him if he but stretched out his hand...

If he softly stood, knelt by Takaya's pillow, slid his hand beneath the

covers...a touch would surely scatter his reason to the winds. Even now his fingertips tingled with the feel of Takaya's cool skin, arousing thoughts that drove his mind to distraction. If the one lying there were someone with whom it could be allowed, he would already have given

in, brushed a trail down that expanse of skin with his lips as a prelude to the satiation of his desire.

He wanted to monopolize him, every second like this, always.

Each time they met those feelings surged, crested, higher and higher.

"..."

He checked his outstretched hand and pulled it back into a fist, laughing softly in self-derision.

(What a fool I am...)

For he could never have what he wanted...

Oh, what relief it would be if he could rend this passion from his heart, uproot every last trace of these feelings which were the source of his suffering.

(This mere delusion—)

This twisted desire could not be anything else. Swallowing the words he had repeated to himself times beyond counting like an aspirin to the heart, he rose as if to reassure himself that he was still in possession of his reason.

He leaned his arms against the cool window glass and gazed down at the night view of [Toyama City](#) .

(I cannot believe in it...)

A self-mocking smile touched the corners of his mouth. —Ah, yes. He held no conviction that either love or sincerity lay within him; what he felt was only a raging, beast-like desire—

Such a thing was not love.

It was merely the spurious product of a perverted consciousness, a delusion born out of the unbearable, incessant pain that had warped his soul during his too-long existence.

This could not be love...

(You damned lunatic...) he cursed himself, and a sardonic smile twisted his lips. He looked over his shoulder at Takaya.

You know nothing of my true self. That's the only reason you would allow yourself to be so unguarded in front of me.

He probably never had the qualifications to be at Kage-tora's side.

Guardian and protector though he might call himself, he had never been able to simply watch over his lord. He was not such a great-hearted man. He wanted to think that living through four hundred years had made him a better person, but however much he wanted enlightenment as an escape from his torment, he had never been able to relinquish the endless cycle of pain and joy and anguish that was human life.

He had once thought that after living for four hundred years, he could become a sage or some such holy man, someone not bound by the earthly desires or thoughts of ordinary men.

But in these centuries without end, he had forgotten even the striving...

The repetition of fake "deaths" had created in him a yearning for the true "death". In that word laid an unutterable peace, and he thought of it now without fear, with a prayer-like longing. To him, the true "death" was...not the purification that followed the cessation of [kanshou](#) ; it had come to mean the annihilation of the soul which refused even reincarnation.

(Human beings cannot liberate themselves from the earthly desires and woes of man, cannot free themselves from the [Six-Path Worlds](#) .)

He could not escape from pain... Only those fortunate people whose lives were finite could believe in the possibility of nirvana and enlightenment.

Naoe looked at Takaya out of haunted eyes.

Are you happy as you are now...? he asked the peaceful sleeping face.

How could he attain happiness? If he could satisfy this insatiable, boundless lust as he might a starving beast, would he be able to forget?

If I make you a slave to my pleasure, if we fell, even more entangled than we are now, could we erase this endless agony we bear in order to

live on?

What did he wish for?

What is it I want, right now, at this moment?

From you...?

Naoe took a deep breath and began to unbutton his shirt in preparation for a shower. He wanted to go to bed as soon as possible, but knew in the back of his mind that he would get no sleep tonight. Perhaps a long draught of whiskey might dispel the feverish heat of his aching body along with these delusions plaguing his mind like a chronic disease.

Such was his thought when—

"?"

The sound of a woman's sobbing reached him. At first he thought it was coming from the next room, but no— The voice grew gradually clearer. He

heard it not with his ears, but with his sixth sense: the voice was coming directly into his mind.

Why had he not noticed such a strong [mind-call](#) until now?

The bitter, hate-filled weeping continued.

Naoe looked out the window. Was it coming from outside—...?

"...Mmn..."

Takaya stirred as Naoe made preparations to head out.

"Where're you going?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No, it's fine... What the?"

Takaya also seemed to have noticed the sobbing. Naoe replied, looking out the window, "I started hearing it a little while ago, and it's got me a bit concerned. I'm going to see if I can track down the source."

"Ah, wait. I'll come with you," Takaya said, and began hurriedly putting on his clothes.

They followed the mind-voice towards the west of the city.

"It seems to be quite close, doesn't it?" Naoe commented after performing a **spirit-sensing** on the city, his eyebrows drawing together warily. "I can feel a strong

<<malice>>. This voice belongs to a spirit, and a strong **onryou** at that—we should have been able to sense it as soon as we arrived..."

"Is it because we came by car?"

"That should not matter. Being in a car should not affect our ability to sense the presence of spirits. This appears to be one with a large

variation in the amount of energy it emits. But what a strong spiritual energy. This is not your ordinary onryou ."

"Could it be an onshou ...?"

"I'm not sure. We'll have to take a look."

Takaya gave a short sneeze next to him. He must be cold after the shower, standing in the somewhat chilly wind. Worried, Naoe laid his coat across Takaya's shoulders.

"Are you all right? Your hair is still wet."

"Yeah... I'm fine..."

It was past midnight, and there were few cars on the road. Tracking the spirit energy back to its source, they cut through Toyama Castle at the center of the city and followed along the tracks of the municipal railway in a direct westward direction.

They had been walking for around fifteen minutes when Takaya said, "Ow... What the hell is this? It feels like someone is screaming with increasing force right into my head."

"What a strong <<malice>>. I would guess that it's been causing supernatural phenomenon in the area..."

They were very close. The sobbing had at some point been overwhelmed by

the intense <<malice>>. They could locate the source now without any spirit-sensing at all.

"It's just ahead."

They were near the Great Toyama Bridge , which spanned [Jinzuu River](#) . An esplanade-like path with a row of sakura trees ran along [Matsu-kawa](#) , one of its tributaries. They followed it, and saw waiting for them a countless number of [kaki](#) .

"What...the..."

The [kaki](#) hovered above [Matsu-kawa](#) like a swarm of fireflies. The <<malice>> was so thick in the air that it blocked their path like a wall. The [mind-call](#) 's source was just beyond.

Two large Japanese hackberry trees stood at the foot of a small bridge.

"...Eek..."

Takaya's wobbling feet were perfectly understandable.

For a woman's head floated there, surrounded by pale flames.

Her hate-filled [onryou](#) was the source of the [mind-call](#) .

A tepid breeze brushed against their cheeks. The woman exuded waves of

hatred and malevolence even as anguish twisted her face.

"She's..."

"A strong [earth-bound spirit](#) . I wonder how many centuries she has been here... She is certainly no ordinary spirit. The [kaki](#) around her must be [onryou](#) like her."



"What should we do with them...?"

Naoe thought for a moment, apparently finding something here suspicious. Judging from their appearance, the spirits around her were not so old—perhaps only a few dozen years. They were all around the same age—perhaps victims from the large-scale air-raids over [Toyama](#) during World War II. Unable to pass to the next world, they must have been pulled in by this woman's strong spiritual power.

The problem was this central spirit. He had seldom seen an [onryou](#) of such strength. She must have died a gruesome death; an unguarded mind would be dragged into her hatred and become deranged itself.

(But she...)

Next to Naoe, absorbed in thought, Takaya suddenly looked up as if he had sensed something.

"There's <<nue >> nearby...!"

Naoe instantly went on guard. Peering at them from the shadows of a nearby house was a skeletal warrior. No, not *a*—several. They were taking stock of the situation, and hurriedly withdrew the moment Takaya spotted them.

"What's with them? This must have something to do with the onshou after all."

"But it would appear that they're not going to attack us. Perhaps they were simply scouting."

"Scouting this woman's floating head?"

Still, it didn't seem like anything was about to happen. The woman's head, though exuding an intense hatred, did not have the appearance of something about to go on a rampage. Rather, what concerned them was the identity of those skeletal warriors.

"What should we do? Perform <<choubuku >> on her right now?"

"No. She is a spirit of considerable power, and we will probably fail if we go at it with so little preparation. She didn't become a spirit just yesterday. Let's observe the situation a little longer. An attack, awkwardly executed, would do more ill than good. Such a difficult opponent requires that we be thoroughly prepared as well," Naoe answered gravely. "We should look into this spirit's background as well. Fortunately, she doesn't appear to be intent on hurting people—"

"But..."

The skeletal warriors peered out at them from time to time from their hiding places. Looking at them out of the corners of his eyes, Naoe added, "If the [onshou](#) 's schemes are somehow in play here, then we must be all the more cautious. Let's go back for tonight. The spirit's energy will probably calm come morning. We'll do a more detailed [spirit-sensing](#) tomorrow."

"All right," Takaya nodded. They turned their backs on the palely glowing [kaki](#) and retraced their steps back to the hotel.

They promptly began with information-gathering the next morning. After finishing breakfast, they started off by asking the hotel personnel some questions.

"Oh, those ghost stories...?"

"Ghost stories?"

"Yes," the concierge nodded. "It's become quite the hot topic in the city lately. You're thinking of the ghost appearing behind the war memorial shrine, right? I guess a lot of people have seen it recently. But I don't know the details," the concierge added, scratching his head. "I've heard that it's the spirit of a princess who lived a long time ago. There's some kind of legend about it. Though I don't really

believe in stuff like that."

The spirit of a princess? Takaya and Naoe looked at each other. They left the hotel and headed for the site, asking the locals along the way about the story. About half of them had heard the rumors. One of them answered, "Ah, yes. It's Princess Sayuri."

The ghost sightings evidently matched a local folklore perfectly.

"Could you tell us more about it?"

The older gentleman, who had been walking his dog at [Toyama Castle](#) , hushed the Shiba pulling on its leash at his feet.

"She was the concubine of the lord who governed this area a long time ago. The stories say that he killed her because he suspected her of infidelity..."

"The lord who governed this area...?" Takaya asked, looking up at Naoe. "Who?"

"If we're talking about the [Edo Period](#) ...the Maeda governed Toyama... Would you happen to know when this happened?" Naoe asked the man.

"When did it happen? Well, let's see, I think it was sometime during the [Sengoku](#) ."

Naoe started. Takaya looked at him.

"That sound familiar?"

"Ah...no. Thank you very much."

They thanked the old man and went on their way. Only after they crossed the moat did Naoe speak.

"I have a bad feeling about this..."

"You know something?"

"If the man in question was commander of Toyama during the [Sengoku](#) , Kagetora-sama, then it would be [Sassa Narimasa](#) ."

"[Sassa Narimasa](#) ? As in, the guy we fought in Nara...?!"

Naoe nodded and said, gazing at the ducks grooming each other by the moat, "Those skeletal warriors reeked of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >> as well. Though it's true that this area is currently within the Oda

sphere of influence... If this has anything to do with [Sassa Narimasa](#) ... In any case, let's take another look at last night's site," Naoe suggested, and they retraced their step from last night.

The place was called the "Sandy Basin Embankment", and the long line of sakura trees here was said to have been planted by [Emperor Taishou](#) . The [Jinzuu River](#) flowed right beside it, and behind the embankment was the green-mantled

war memorial. Residences filled the surrounding area. They stopped a woman who appeared to be one of those residents to ask some questions.

"It's been happening for about a week, at night. You can see the reflections of floating will o' the wisps or some such in the windows, and there'd be a...rapping sound? Something like that... And my husband said that he's seen a floating, freshly-severed head..."

As I thought, Naoe thought, brows drawing together.

"My children are scared, and it's been a huge bother. Of course I've heard the old stories about these parts, but I never thought that the princess' ghost would actually still be here, after all this time..."

"Do you know the legend?"

"Yes. The story of the single hackberry tree, yes? About Princess Sayuri..."

"The single hackberry tree? Would you tell us the story?"

The kindly matron beckoned them closer to the site and told them of the legend of Princess Sayuri.

During the [Sengoku](#) Period, around the time [Sassa Narimasa](#) governed Toyama, he had a concubine called Sayuri, who was said to be a peerless beauty. She was the daughter of a wealthy farmer from a village called Gohuku. Narimasa was returning from a sakura viewing when he saw Sayuri among the people kneeling by the roadside, and he took her as his concubine. Narimasa favored her so much that he never allowed her to leave his side.

The other concubines grew jealous of Sayuri and plotted against her. When Narimasa left the castle on a visit to [Tokugawa Ieyasu](#) in [Hamamatsu](#), they fabricated a rumor that she was unfaithful to him. Narimasa flew into a rage and put the man to the sword on the spot. He then hanged Sayuri and her entire family by the sandy embankment of the [Jinzuu River](#) and beheaded them. The story went that he suspended the innocent Sayuri

from the hackberry tree by her ankles and tortured her before killing

her. Ignoring her pleas of innocence in his frenzied rage, he slashed into her body each time he decapitated another of her family, drawing out her death.

The scene was thus recorded in the [Taikou Chronicles](#) :

At the moment of her death, Sayuri, her lips bitten through, bloody tears flowing down a once-beautiful face now twisted into a malevolent mask, cursed Narimasa—

"As Narimasa beheads me here, my enmity shall a demon become, to grow

year by year until I have killed all thine issue even unto the extinction of thy family name."

Those watching covered their eyes, and those who heard felt their hair rise at those words.

So Sayuri remained in that place as an [onryou](#) after her untimely death. The villagers, believing that the hackberry

tree to which she had been tied had been stained by her hatred, became fearful that "those who cut down a hackberry tree will be cursed."

Various ghost stories were told to frighten people, about a will o' the wisp that looked like a woman's head appearing on stormy nights, which came to be called "Sayuri Fire" or "Drifting Fire"...

The hackberry tree was burnt down during the air-raid of Toyama in 1945, but a second generation of two trees grew out of the original tree's seeds, and now spread their wide branches right in the middle of

the row of cherry trees.

"Those are the second-generation trees," the woman told them, indicating the spot where the woman's head had appeared last night.

Though the ghost was nowhere to be seen, <<malice>> permeated the surrounding area, and the residue of hatred stained the ground.

The woman went on her way. Takaya approached the hackberry trees, murmuring, "He's a pretty vicious bastard, that Narimasa. She didn't even do anything to deserve that kind of a death...." Takaya didn't try to hide his anger. "I mean, Princess Sayuri told him that she was innocent, didn't she? So why wouldn't he listen to her? If he loved her that much, then why didn't he believe her?"

Pain flashed across Naoe's face.

"Perhaps it's when you love someone that there are some things you can't forgive."

"Why??" Takaya demanded, glaring sharply at Naoe. "When you love someone, you should believe them more than other people, right? Don't you think Narimasa was treating Princess Sayuri like an object, like a thing to be owned? Doesn't that make him just a jealous, selfish asshole? It's no wonder she hated him after being killed like that."

Naoe was silent.

He could not bring himself to condemn Narimasa completely. After

hearing the legend from the woman, he felt sympathy for what Narimasa must have felt as he so brutally murdered Sayuri.

"Such a terrifying thing is love."

Takaya looked at Naoe. Naoe laid a hand on the hackberry tree and gazed up at its broad branches.

"Such emotions are not so uncommon..."

"..."

"To want to kill that person with your own hands rather than have them be stolen from you—before they can be touched by anyone else. An intense need to monopolize someone can transform love to murderous rage

in an instant..." Startled by the cynical words, Takaya stared at Naoe's face.

"I would never have expected to hear something like that from you."

"Is that so? That is only because you do not know me..."

Takaya asked quietly, "Have you...felt that way about someone as well?"

Naoe looked back at Takaya, his eyes slowly narrowing. That startlingly chilling gaze frightened Takaya for an instant.

"How could I monopolize something...I've never even been able to touch...?"

Takaya stared at Naoe, eyes wide. Naoe painfully closed his eyes for a

moment, then deliberately turned his gaze to the hackberry.

"But I wonder why Sayuri's **onryou** would rouse now...? Maybe it has something to do with Narimasa's rebirth?"

Takaya made no response. He stared down at his feet, absorbed in thought. Concerned, Naoe smiled his gentle, soothing smile.

"...I was joking just now."

"Naoe..."

Naoe put on his business-like face to check the rest of Takaya's words.

"We still don't know the identity of those warrior-spirits. Even if they belonged to Narimasa, they were acting quite strangely—as if they were awaiting someone."

"... Sayuri's **onryou** awakened a week ago, right? Maybe someone's using her as some part of a plot..."

Naoe glanced at Takaya out of the corners of his eyes.

"Should we perform <<**choubuku**>> on her?"

"No, we can do that any time... Let's get to the bottom of this if we can before we do..." Takaya murmured, when—

"Hmm, you're pretty easy-going, as usual."

"!"

They whirled at the interjection, uttered by a familiar voice. Its

owner was seated quietly beneath the sakura trees. They had not sensed his presence at all. Both of them exclaimed in stunned surprise as they recognized him: "You...!"

"How unexpected it is to see you here, [Yasha-shuu](#) of the Uesugi."

The handsome, totally unexpected youth smiled sweetly at them.

It was [Kousaka Danjou Nosuke Masanobu](#) , vassal of the Takeda.

To You, My Beloved Chapter 3: Prisoner to an Obsessive Love

An

elegant classical tune played within the sparsely-populated teahouse. Takaya, seated at the window with Naoe beside him, had been glaring with unconcealed hostility at the man across the table from them since they'd encountered him at the river. Kousaka calmly sipped an iced coffee without the least sign of discomfiture.

He abruptly looked up at Takaya. "Why are you so tense?"

Takaya slammed a hand down on the table as his nerves snapped.

"Why the hell d'we have to have tea with this bastard?"

"It's better than standing around talking under the blazing sun. And besides, we never really had the chance to celebrate our reunion. It must be fate that we met here, since I've wanted to talk to you at our leisure." Kousaka's eyes glinted queerly. "Kagetora-dono."

"You bastard...!"

Naoe checked Takaya as he half-rose, shaking his fist at Kousaka. Naoe, equally wary, asked in a cold voice, "Why are you in Toyama?"

"No particular reason. I was passing through when I saw something that tweaked my interest, and thought I'd stop for a bit to watch the show."

"Tweaked your interest? You're not talking about Sayuri's onryou , are you?"

"...Hmm?" Kousaka crossed his legs slowly, leaving no opening in his defenses as he moved. "That extraordinary hatred reached me all the way in Kanazawa .

It was a force of will I've rarely encountered these past few years, so I thought it'd be worth a visit to see what sort of spirit was its source."

Both Takaya and Naoe's eyes widened. Such was Kousaka Danjou 's unrivaled spirit-sensing ability; the keenness of his perception was clearly on a completely different level.

"But I never expected to find you out here. Otherwise I'd have hatched a few battle-plans."

"Damn you...!" Takaya gritted out, but backed down beneath Kousaka's clear gaze.

A slight smile appeared on Kousaka's handsome face. "Do drop the boorish act, Kagetora-dono. I am here today simply as an old friend."

"...!"

Kousaka's arrogant assuredness undermined Takaya's aggressive posturing. For Takaya, Kousaka was the man who had gotten Yuzuru possessed by Shingen, who had caused Kokuryou's wife's death—someone he

was supposed to hate. If he could, he would attack Kousaka right here

and now. But with Naoe holding him back, his only outlet for his hatred and seething anger was his eyes, which gleamed like those of a wild beast.

Kousaka glanced at Takaya and turned to Naoe. "Hmm, looks like the tiger's gone feral again."

"Are you here to scout [Ecchuu](#) ?"

"Not quite scout, but...activity in the area has been a thorn in our side."

Now that [Echigo](#) ([Niigata Prefecture](#)) lay within the Takeda sphere of influence, it certainly came as no surprise that they would want to sound out the conditions of the surrounding area.

"Your adversary is the Oda...?"

"Until just recently. But right now there's someone even more troublesome wandering about."

"What...?"

Kousaka looked up at them from beneath lowered brows.

"The followers of the [Ikkou Sect](#) have been moving: underlings of Hongan-ji Kousa—Kennyō."

At the name [Kennyō](#) , Naoe frowned.

Hongan-ji Kousa, better known as [Kennyō](#) , had been the eleventh chief abbot of the [Hongan Temple](#) True Pure Lands Sect and the leading religious strategist of the [Sengoku](#) . The warlords of the era had always

feared an armed revolt by the followers of the [Ikkou Sect](#) , which had banded together, organizing itself with [Ishiyama Hongan Temple](#) in [Settsu](#) (now Osaka Prefecture) as its center, and boasted of a mighty army. When [Kennyo](#) became the head priest of [Hongan Temple](#) in 1557, he also became the leader of a great following.

[Kennyo](#) issued a call to arms against Nobunaga to [Ikkou Sect](#) followers all across the country; thereafter, he joined hands with Shogun [Ashikaga Yoshiaki](#) and directed the sectarians of the [North-Central Region](#) , [Ise - Nagashima](#) , and the provinces around Kyoto in violent opposition to Nobunaga. He

also formed an alliance with the Takeda, Uesugi, and Mouri clans to check the Oda army's ambition of conquest of the country.

Though in the end Oda managed to eke a victory from the fierce battle and left [Kennyo](#) no choice but submission, the margin of victory suggested that [Kennyo](#) could be called Oda's strongest enemy.

Kenshin also had difficulty with the [Ikkou-ikki](#) army of the [North-Central Region](#) , the largest barrier between the Uesugi army and the capital—which meant that there were deep bindings of fate between the [Ikkou Sect](#) and the Uesugi as well...

The wraiths of the [Ikkou Sect](#) had joined the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> many years ago, and their organizational strength had, unsurprisingly,

been a huge problem for Naoe and the others, resulting in many painful experiences. Even so, the Oda forces in the [North-Central Region](#) had managed to push them back these past few years, ground the [Ikkou Sect](#) was now struggling to regain.

Naoe asked Kousaka gravely, "I have heard that they've recaptured the entire [Kaga](#) region from Oda... Do you know what is fueling this recent rally?"

"... Have you heard the rumors of [Akechi Mitsuhide](#) and his lot in the provinces around Kyoto?"

"Yes. That he's formed an alliance with [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) and the Araki family... You don't mean...!" Naoe caught his breath.

Kousaka crossed his arms and replied calmly, "Indeed. The [Ikkou Sect](#) has formed an anti-Oda coalition with [Akechi Mitsuhide](#) . [Kennyo](#) intends to use that alliance to annihilate Oda's forces in the [North-Central Region](#) . That is probably why they are aiming for [Sassa Narimasa](#) , the Oda commander who once ruled this territory and is now tasked with dealing with the [Ikkou Sect](#) ."

"Then their aim is to crush Narimasa... Which means Princess Sayuri's [onryou](#) is also...!"

Kousaka nodded with a finger on his chin. "I assume you saw the spirit-warriors. They were <<[nue](#)>> sent by [Kennyo](#) , and I believe they've roused Sayuri's spirit to lure Narimasa here. Narimasa's current territory is [Higo](#) (now [Kumamoto Prefecture](#)), but the intensification of the opposition in the provinces near the old capital means that [Mori Ranmaru](#) has been called there. Whereas Narimasa's role is to stop the advance of the [Ikkou Sect](#) . It appears that [Kennyo](#) has gone to great lengths to set up the attack on Narimasa. Sayuri has

become a tool in that scheme." Kousaka paused and looked out at the cars streaming by outside the window. "Sayuri has grown so strong that Narimasa will have no choice but to come back. She's the bomb that will rip Narimasa apart, and it was a failure on his part to have left something like that behind. I dropped by on my way back to see for myself how well the [Ikkou Sect](#) can play this out."

"..."

For a moment forgetting his hostility against Kousaka, Takaya turned to Naoe. The **onshou** of the **Ikkou Sect** were the ones who had roused Sayuri in their battle against Oda.

"But Narimasa is **kanshousha** ,"

Takaya commented doubtfully. "Even if they use Sayuri, I don't think they'll be able to finish him off that easily—'cause even if his body dies, he'll just perform **kanshou** on somebody else, right?"

"Once they kill his body, they can attack his soul before it has a chance to perform **kanshou** ", Kousaka answered with arms crossed. "This is how the **onshou** of the <<**Yami-Sengoku**>> fight each other. With the <<power>> generated from their

hate, they can wound the soul of their opponent and destroy any power they have remaining in this world. To be deprived of that power is equivalent to 'death' for the **onshou** . That is the way of war in the <<**Yami-Sengoku**>>.

So without his body, Narimasa would become a mere spirit. Of course," Kousaka added with a chuckle, "that is true for us as well. In any case, I would guess that **Kennyō** 's spirit-warriors have informed him by now that you are in Toyama. Let me give you some friendly advice: don't poke your noses carelessly into this. It'd be best to let the **onshou** kill each other off however they want. Why don't we all just sit atop our mountain and watch the spectacle unfold?

"Yeah right," Takaya snapped. "What if Sayuri's spirit gets out of hand? What kinda ruckus d'you think that'll cause?"

"No, Kagetora-sama," Naoe stopped him, "I believe we should watch the situation for a little while longer. As long as Sayuri's hatred is directed exclusively at Narimasa, the city residents should not come to any harm. We should avoid interceding in haste and provoking the Ikkou Sect at this stage. Instead, we need to choose our opportunity with care—since they are difficult enough to handle as it is," Naoe concluded grimly.

Naoe was advocating against recklessness. As long as there was no direct impact on society or harm to ordinary people and no need for immediate intervention, it was in their best interest to probe their opponents' strength and circumstances with all due caution before making their move. One could say that their duty was similar to police who interceded in disputes between gangs. Once they entered the battle, they had the ability to drastically impact the strength of any side. But depending on their method, they could also potentially exacerbate the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

I totally knew that, Takaya thought, still looking dissatisfied. Kousaka gazed at him with his usual ambiguous smile.

"...Hah. How like him to be so utterly lacking in ambition. I almost feel like I'm looking at the old Kenshin. If he so chooses, Kagetora-dono could use his power of <<choubuku >> to rule the entire country..."

Takaya glared sharply at him. Kousaka, lips still curved in a smile, looked completely unaffected.

"But who am I to complain? The current Kagetora-dono appears well-satisfied with his tepid existence. Perhaps he is already sated with the pleasure of being surrounded by fools, now that he's used to having them chasing after his tail."

"What...what did you say?!"

"Kousaka." Naoe interrupted in a tight voice. "...There is something I would like to talk to you about. Could you come with me for a moment?"

Kousaka lifted his eyes and looked at Naoe as if he had expected those words.

"...Fine by me."

They left Takaya alone inside and walked to the river, stopping beneath a line of sakura trees. Naoe turned to Kousaka, eyes cold. "I don't know what you're thinking, but I would like you to stop provoking Kagetora-sama."

Kousaka returned indifferently, "Provoke? Me?"

"He is still emotionally unstable. And even were that not the case, the radical changes in himself these past few months have made him uneasy. I will not allow you to upset him further with your careless words."

"Humph. Here I was thinking you might have something interesting to say, but it turns out to be the same old drivel."

Naoe glared at him sharply. Kousaka smiled faintly.

"That's why I call you naïve. Did you think that your warning would actually affect me in any way? Information is our currency—information on our enemies' vulnerabilities, that is. Why should I care about what is and isn't convenient for you?"

"—Kousaka, you bastard...!"

"Or do you mean you don't want me to say anything that might provoke Kagetora into regaining his memories?"



"...!"

When Naoe's face stiffened exactly as expected, Kousaka snorted lightly with contempt. "Have you made your move on Kagetora yet?"

Naoe jerked back. Kousaka smirked. "From your reaction, I guess not."

"..."

Naoe's eyes narrowed, and Kousaka laughed. "Kagetora-dono is certainly a tolerant master, to allow a beast like you to stay by him. You pretend you're at his side to protect him, but in reality you're only waiting for a chance to take him into your arms so you can satisfy that secret desire seething inside you, aren't you. I hardly think Kagetora-dono would respond to his vassal's lust with favor. Or is he knowingly spurring you on?"

"Shut up, Kousaka!" an enraged Naoe snarled. "You can say what you like about me, but you will *not* insult Kagetora-sama."

"Humph, don't make me laugh." Kousaka's malicious gaze moved back to Naoe. "What a twisted man you are. *You're* the bastard who disgraces your own lord. How many times have you violated Kagetora in your mind? How many times have you forced him to submit to you?"

"...!"

Naoe, pushed to his limit, swung at Kousaka. Kousaka easily sidestepped the blow and caught Naoe's fist in his hand.

"...What a fool you are."

"..."

Quickly brushing aside the fist still forcing itself towards him, Kousaka turned on his heels with a faint smile.

"They'll start moving if Narimasa returns to Toyama. You should go do

some sight-seeing before that happens. We'll probably see each other again, Naoe."

"Where are you going?"

"That's my own business, wouldn't you say? Well, have fun chasing Kagetora's tail—" Kousaka looked back at him, eyes clear and piercing, "Master Timid Wolf."

"..."

Kousaka walked off beneath the luxuriantly green sakura trees, leaving Naoe with fists trembling behind him.

At least pay for your own coffee, Naoe cursed inwardly.

You're the bastard who disgraces your own lord...

Naoe looked down as if in denial of the truth of those words.

How long could they stay as they were?

These violent emotions pressing so tightly against his chest...which should have been erased long ago.

How long can I face you like this...?

When he returned to the teahouse, Takaya was glaring into the distance, chin in his hand and glass empty. Suppressed anger towards Kousaka? Yet

this faraway gaze was so precious to him. Naoe's steps suddenly halted.

The razor edge in that gaze, like an exquisite sword-blade, fascinated ever as it mercilessly wounded whomever it touched.

Such a being should never be dirtied by the likes of him.

"..."

Naoe brows knitted as he pushed back those feelings. Then he quickly redonned his expressionless mask before resuming his steps. He could not allow Takaya to notice the pain beneath that mask. Takaya looked up at him sullenly.

"What happened to that guy?"

"He left. But we'll probably see him again."

Takaya, who appeared to truly despise Kousaka, still looked angry.

"That guy totally pisses me off, looking down on people like that.

You'd better not stop me next time we meet, Naoe! I'm totally gonna punch his face in...!"

Suddenly noticing Naoe's silence and stillness, Takaya asked uncertainly, "Naoe?"

"..."

Naoe turned away from Takaya, a hand pressed against his mouth.

Suddenly, and for no reason at all, his eyes welled. He closed them hard, trying to hold back the tears.

"What's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"

"No, I'm fine. It's nothing."

"Naoe...?"

Even with eyes closed he knew what expression would be on Takaya's face. If only Takaya wouldn't look at him with such a straightforward gaze. ...It only made him that much more aware of his own ugliness.

Finally clamping a lid down on his emotions, Naoe looked up weakly.

"...Shall we go, Takaya-san?"

That night they switched from a shared double to two single rooms.

Seeing Takaya's uncertain expression, he explained, "We won't have to be so conscious of each other this way, yes?"

To which Takaya retorted in annoyance, "So you're saying that you're always that conscious of me?"

Naoe replied a little tiredly, "I am conscious of you. You, more than anyone."

"..."

Naoe attributed the hint of loneliness in Takaya's expression to his own imagination. He handed Takaya the key. He had discovered on further

acquaintance that there was in Ougi Takaya an unexpectedly child-like

yearning to be indulged, but Naoe appealed to his reason not to take advantage of that weakness.

(I'm forgetting...) He had a sense of impending crisis. (He is more dangerous than this.)

He had to be careful. This was only one side of him. How many times over had he realized that, whenever he attempted to take advantage of Kagetora's vulnerability, he had been hurt instead? He had always been the one to feel the bite of Kagetora's fangs after allowing himself to be led about by the apparent weakness that Kagetora exposed as bait.

And then waited in ambush, claws sheathed.

That is his true nature. I must not allow myself to be deceived.

If he were simply someone to protect—

I would not have been so bewitched by him.

"Naoe. Naoe!"

Takaya's voice calling his name pulled him back to himself, and he looked up. Takaya had entered the elevator and was waiting for him.

"What's wrong? Did something happen? You've been acting really strangely lately."

(I have to be careful.) Naoe cautioned himself, and smiled tiredly. "... Not lately. Always."

Agreeing to meet for dinner at seven in the upper lounge, they retired to their separate rooms. Takaya said nothing, but kept looking at Naoe worriedly. That gaze scorched Naoe's mind.

(Why did I have to come here and be trifled with by these feelings?)

He collapsed on the bed, an arm across his eyes. He had always known that these tangled emotions, stifled for twenty-eight years by a profound consciousness of sin and regret, would come to life again upon deeper interaction with Takaya.

He had never been able to forget about him for a second. And had suffered because he could not forget. Anguish, torment, pain beyond his ability to withstand... The agony of having lost him had paralyzed all else, and his heart, weakened to the verge of death, had finally been suppressed by reason. He had come this far by discarding all sentiment.

Yes. Even until this very moment—

The beast within him stirred, inhaled.

Drawing life from your presence.

Could that ferocious beast kill once again?

He clawed at the weakness engulfing him, feeling as if he might crumble away.

He had to keep it from taking another breath.

His reason was being worn away, little by little, at that thinnest of boundaries.

The knock on the door resounded in the quiet room. Naoe leapt out of bed, shoving away the vile thoughts driving his mind to distraction and locking them back into his chest. He hurriedly opened the door.

Takaya stood there.

Naoe's breath caught. For a moment he didn't know what expression to wear.

"Kagetora-sama..."

"Ah...er, I thought we might head up for dinner..." Takaya said awkwardly, and fell silent. It was only a little past five. Naoe suddenly felt exhausted. For a moment he wondered if Takaya had read the repulsive desire writ plain on his open face.

At Naoe's surprise, Takaya looked down and muttered, "I...look, have I said something weird to you?"

"Eh...?"

"Did I say anything to depress you?" Takaya had apparently been worried, wondering if some careless thing he said had caused this change in Naoe. "I..." Takaya added, "well, 'cause I know how painful words can be. Obnoxious jerks can still hurt you with words even if they don't use their fists."

"..."

"So... I didn't want to say anything to you that would rub you the wrong way. was trying to be careful..."

Takaya seemed to be reaching for some sort of apology, but couldn't quite get it out. The mumbled words came out sounding more defensive than anything else...

"So...um... Argh, geez, I have no idea what the heck I'm saying!"

Naoe gazed silently at Takaya as he grew more flustered and irritated by the minute.

So he had noticed nothing— No, the thought would never even have crossed his mind. But of course. Takaya could never have conceived of Naoe as a possible romantic interest. Naoe was his vassal, his protector, a man. His common sense would have ruled out the possibility completely.

So he could never have realized. That even now, at this very moment, in his own mind ...Naoe was tearing off his clothes, making him a prisoner to abhorrent pleasure...

Sympathy and resentment warred within Naoe. He felt both relief at the success of his masquerade and immeasurable hatred of Takaya for his obliviousness. Those few innocent words had, contrary to Takaya's best intentions, wounded Naoe all the more deeply. His sympathy had invoked the very opposite effect. And Takaya's obliviousness to even that fact

stoked the flames of his anger. He glared at Takaya, eyes razor-sharp with irony.

"Are you so afraid of hurting someone?"

"Huh...?"

"Such a sentiment is absolutely worthless."

Takaya choked and scowled at Naoe. A faint, cold smile drifted into Naoe's eyes.

"Such artful language as you might utilize is an easily-avoidable blade—a triviality. You are the one with is afraid. You and you alone."

"..."

"But you would never see it, no matter how much you floundered. And there is nothing you could do about it even if you did. There is nothing you can do. To live without hurting anyone is an unattainable ideal. Only hypocrites in their arrogance are capable of such conceit."

Takaya continued to glare at him angrily. This person standing before him, as incapable of concealing his feelings as he was and reacting exactly as Naoe knew he would...was so precious to him.

Naoe narrowed his eyes slightly. "You would never be able to see that is it you yourself who is hurting me."

"..."

"So long as you are not me..."

"... You..."

Anger turned into shock. Why was Naoe saying this? Takaya could not understand it at all. Why did Naoe, who always protected him, encouraged him, at times direct words so filled with hostility towards him?

Did it mean that Naoe actually hated him?

The doubts surfacing bit by bit in the back of his mind now emerged in perfect clarity. Yes: this was the origin of Takaya's uncertainty towards Naoe— This piercing coldness that appeared and disappeared again within his gentleness and kindness.

Each glimpse of it wounded him more deeply, more sharply, than anyone. So he had, all unconsciously, built walls around himself, between himself and Naoe, out of fear of its touch. And there was something else he didn't understand: Naoe's expression immediately after, the pain on his face as if the ice-blade of those words had cut into him at the same time. Each and every time.

Why did he say them?

What could he do to stop Naoe from doing it?

What was it Naoe truly wanted from him?

Naoe would not tell him—refused, each and every time, to tell him. That was why he felt such unease. Was it because of what had happened

between him and Kagetora that he never talked about himself? Or was the

resignation on his face disappointment that Takaya could not truly become "Kagetora"? Was he annoyed at Takaya for failing to become that

image in his mind? How could Takaya think anything but that the pain on his face, the pain that he insisted on bearing alone, was an accusation?

Takaya slowly shook his head.

"I don't understand... I can't understand you at all..."

"...Takaya-san...?"

Takaya could no longer keep his voice down. "So what should I do?!

Should I get my memories back? Should I go back to being Kagetora? Do you hate me for being Ougi Takaya that much? What is it you want from me? What would it take for me to satisfy you?!"

Naoe's eyes widened.

"What the hell is with you?! What the hell are you?! You always have that expression on your face like you want me to do something, but you never tell me what it is...! If there's something you want to say, then just fucking spit it out! You're standing in front of me *right now* looking like you want to slit your own wrists... I don't want you looking at me like that anymore!"

An intense pain tore through Naoe's chest, and he pushed back against it with all his might. He stared at Takaya as if to brace himself, but

Takaya's brows drew together as if he could not bear even that gaze.

"Just tell me what you want me to do. What am I doing to make you look like that? I don't know what I'm supposed to do. If you don't tell me anything, how am I supposed to know anything?!"

"...Takaya-san."

"I'll do anything. I'll do whatever you tell me. Isn't that enough?

Kagetora or Ougi Takaya, I'll be whoever you want me to be...! So stop looking at me like that. Just tell me. I don't fucking understand you—!" Takaya pleaded, his breathing ragged, so agitated that tears blurred his eyes.

(No!)

Naoe forced back the impulses threatening to overwhelm him.

He was certain that Takaya asked not for him, but for Takaya himself.

Oscillating between Kagetora and Ougi Takaya and unable to settle on either, he sought an answer in his confusion—but...!

Such a question...

Such a question should not be asked of him.

Naoe desperately fought against his own insistent impulses. How could

Takaya say that to him when he knew nothing about him? How could he...

Don't look at me with those eyes—don't provoke the beast beneath the mask!

"Please, leave."

Takaya's eyes widened.

"Please leave. I am asking you to get out of my sight. Please."

"Naoe..."

"I don't know anymore what I might do next, what crime I— Hurry. I can't hold on much longer."

Takaya's eyes wavered in his bewilderment. "...Why...?"

"Why?"

A beast with its piercing stare looked out of Naoe's eyes.

"What would you do with the answer? 'Why'...? What would you do with any answer I give, when it's far too late...! Why...?!"

He hated Takaya for asking that question with such innocence. As if he bore no part of the blame...

"It's all because of you..."

"..."

"Because...you are here. *Because you are here.* Otherwise—otherwise I would never have lived for so long. I would never

have felt this agony! If you had never existed...if only if you had never been born into this world...!"

Takaya stopped breathing. The answer he had dreaded was now falling

with stunning bluntness from Naoe's lips. Takaya stood frozen, eyes wide.

"Because of me?"

"..."

"Would you...be happier...if I...didn't exist...?"

"...!"

Takaya bit his lip, his trembling fists bloodless. His shoulders quivered with the need to hold back his emotions.

"... All right."

Naoe's arms encircled Takaya's shoulders just as he turned. In that suspended moment in time his body had reacted before any words could find their way out of his mouth.

Desperately, wordlessly, he embraced Takaya from behind.

"Naoe...!"

"..."

He shut his eyes tightly, trying to master the pain, his body trembling in sympathy with Takaya's.

"Say nothing—..."

Suddenly assailed by an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, Takaya stopped resisting and stood frozen in place.

You understand nothing.

And it is far better that you don't.

If he allowed his hand to trail down Takaya's body...he could unfasten those buttons at his chest, one by one...

Time, etched and inerasable, violently spurred on those savage feelings.

He had to kill it.

Hurry, now...

The mad beast was opening its eyes.

Before it bared its fangs...

To You, My Beloved Chapter 4: Bitter Reunion

That night they received some completely unexpected visitors.

Their guests were two men. That they were possessed by [onshou](#) was obvious at first sight, but oddly enough they displayed virtually no hostility towards the [Yasha-shuu](#) .

In fact, their behavior was quite amicable when they approached Naoe and Takaya, whom they courteously followed to the second-floor Tea Room. The one with the shrewd eyes introduced himself as [Shimozuma Rairen](#) , the younger as [Shimozuma Raishou](#) .

"Our cooperation...?" Naoe's eyes widened upon hearing their request.

"Do you mean that you wish our help in attacking Narimasa?"

Rairen nodded quietly. Takaya was as surprised, but had not spoken since the start of the conversation. Immersed in his own thoughts, he had answered with dull disinterest even upon hearing of Rairen and Raishou's visit.

Naoe refused to meet his eyes. The reason for Takaya's moping was doubtlessly their earlier quarrel.

Naoe could not guess at Takaya's thoughts. ...So he could not allow himself to fall into the same depression. He could not allow his emotions to interfere in his work; he was, after all, an adult.

"You must have already noted our work here in Toyama," Shimosuma Rairen began.

Rairen had been a temple official of the True Pure Lands School (Ikkou Sect) as well as a commander in the battle of Ishiyama Hongan Temple (now Osaka Castle). He could be called Kennyo 's tactical right arm, and in his previous life had been renowned as a superb strategist; with the Saiga Arquebus Corps and the Ikki forces of the North-Central Region , he had been able to freely maneuver provisions and reinforcements from the Mouri Flotilla to hold the Oda army at bay for ten years.

Raishou, also a temple official at Hongan Temple , had been in charge of the Ikkou Sect of the North-Central Region and served as a liaison between Kennyo and Shichiri Yorichika , leader of the Kaga sectarians. In his previous life he had battled Oda's Ikki-subjugation army and died in battle with Asakura Kagetane 's troops.

Naoe had been aware of their resurrection, but this was the first time he had come face-to-face with them.

The "work" Rairen had mentioned, needless to say, involved Sayuri's onryou . Kousaka's speculation about the Ikkou Sect using her as bait for Narimasa had been dead on.

"Much has reached our ears of your recent activities, including your extermination of Matsunaga Hisahide 's 'Hiragumo '..."

Matsunaga Hisahide had formed an anti-Oda alliance with Akechi Mitsuhide . Which meant that the Ikkou Sect would also be their ally. Naoe inwardly cautioned himself to stay on his guard.

"We are, as you know, in the midst of preparations for battle and steadily expanding our anti-Oda Alliance over the provinces near the

old capital and the [North-Central Region](#) ,"

Rairen stated confidently. "Oda is the malignant tumor invading this world. We must prevent the Demon King's resurrection at any cost, and make of this land of the rising sun a true Pure Land on earth. Takeda of [Kai](#) and [Echigo](#) and Houjou of [Sagami](#) once requested and have requested again that the [Ikkou Sect](#) revive the anti-Oda coalition of old..."

Takaya and Naoe looked up abruptly. Rairen continued firmly, "We were sent here to destroy the Oda forces in the [North-Central Region](#) . Here we will dispose of [Sassa Narimasa](#) , who leads the advance guard dispatched against us, and drive his evil from this place once and for all."

"..."

"That cursed Narimasa is the leader of the faction of Oda forces which has performed [kanshou](#) .

His demise would mean a dramatic decrease in Oda's fighting strength. Do you not think this is an unparalleled opportunity to slay the head of the Oda forces?" Rairen pressed. He took a deep breath. "Will you not lend us your aid, Uesugi-dono, and join hands with us to bring about [Sassa Narimasa](#) 's end?"

"..."

Naoe glanced out of the corners of his eyes at Takaya, who was glaring steadily at nothing.

Killing Narimasa, a [kanshousha](#) , would certainly be a difficult proposition for them acting alone, but with the aid of Sayuri's hate-filled [onryou](#) and these [onshou](#) of the [Ikkou Sect](#) , it was possible that they would be able to exorcise him for good. Their aim was the same. However—

(This is the Ikkou Sect ...Kennyō's followers.) Naoe was not about to let his guard down.

Rairen leaned forward. "What think you, Uesugi-dono?"

Takaya spoke for the first time. "We can't help you."

Rairen and Raishou—and Naoe as well—stared with surprise at Takaya. He

gazed directly back at the two Ikkou commanders, clear-eyed and decisive, almost startlingly confident.

"The Uesugi cannot lend you our aid. Our power was not made to be used by the onshou. Sorry, but we refuse your request."

"Wh-what are you... But...!"

"Don't you think you're barking up the wrong tree here? Or do I need to remind you that we are not onshou—that we're here to make people like you disappear? And yet you're asking us for help? Don't me make me laugh."

Takaya's provocative tone shocked Naoe. Raishou half-rose at Takaya's deliberate insolence, but Rairen stopped him.

"Then there is nothing I might say to convince you?" he inquired with perfect calm.

Takaya responded flatly, "None."

The two sides glared silently at each other. Rairen thought for a moment, eyes hooded, before speaking again.

"We understand. Then there is just one thing we would like to ask of you—'

"... What?"

"That you stay completely out of this affair between Narimasa and our sect..."

"..."

Takaya's eyes narrowed. "You want a promise of neutrality from us?"

Rairen, blotting sweat off his brow, looked gravely at Takaya, who still seemed dissatisfied as he thought upon his response. Sensing it, Naoe quickly responded for both of them.

"We understand, Rairen-dono."

"...!"

Taken off guard, Takaya glared daggers at Naoe. Naoe ignored him, adding, "We will stay completely out of this affair with Sayuri. We promise not to lend our aid to either side. If you agree to two conditions."

"Which are...?"

"One, that innocent bystanders will not be harmed, for any reason. Two, that this battle will come to a close within the next three days."

Naoe's eyes flashed like the edge of a knife. "If you cannot put an end to this disturbance within the specified time, we will immediately intercede with our power of <<choubuku >>. If that should happen, I will

not be able to say with any certainty which side will fall."

"Possibly both" was what Naoe had left unsaid. Rairen nodded firmly.

"Very well. Three days, then. Fear not, Narimasa will arrive in [Toyama](#) tonight. This battle will be concluded tomorrow morning," Rairen

informed them, and stressed, "We have your promise then, Uesugi-dono."

"..."

Takaya made no reply, only gazed at the two servants of the [Ikkou Sect](#) in clear-eyed silence until they finally stood and left. Takaya looked after them grimly.

After a moment, he murmured in a low voice, "Why didn't you let me answer?"

Though Takaya was not looking at him, the question was directed at Naoe. He had an answer ready.

"You were about to refuse their request for neutrality, were you not? I could not let you do so. We must not take the [Ikkou Sect](#) lightly, Kage-tora-sama, for it is to us a natural enemy."

Takaya still refused to look at him. Naoe remonstrated, "The soldiers of the [Ikkou Sect](#) are fervent believers who once fought to create the paradise of the

Pure Land here on earth. Or perhaps calling them fanatics would come closer to the truth. These are the souls who remained behind in this world despite fully believing that they would reach their Pure Land once they died. Though they became [onryō](#) because of their hatred for Nobunaga, they follow no path but that of [Amida Nyorai](#) even to this day."

"..."

"Their ardent devotion to [Amida Nyorai](#) will block even our power of <<[choubuku](#)>>. We must be cautious in dealing with them..."

Takaya closed his eyes for a moment as he listened. "... I get your point. However—"

Takaya looked sharply at Naoe, his glare like a sword thrust parried and returned.

"!"

Naoe felt that gaze like a shock of icy water against his heart, and his shoulders quivered. Takaya delivered his warning with his eyes boring into Naoe's: "Never forget this, Naoe. I will not overlook you answering in my place again. No matter the reason, the decision is not yours to make. Let me remind you of your place: you are my vassal; I don't care what the circumstances—condescension from a vassal towards his master is impermissible."

"..."

"Remember that."

Chills ran down his spine.

Taking a thin breath past a constricted throat, Naoe looked down and managed painfully, "My...deepest apologies."

"..."

Takaya gazed silently at Naoe, eyes cold. He was perfectly composed, as if he were merely exercising his natural right.

An emotion he had forgotten until now welled up into his chest as

Takaya assumed for a moment the incisive manner of his lord Kagetora: an intense inferiority in the face of Kagetora's innate talent.

Kagetora was a born leader, a gift Naoe would never have. Or at the least, Kagetora exemplified the qualities to which Naoe would always submit. Such was his inconcealable birthright—

A radiance possessed only by the Absolute...

How could he so unconsciously and yet so magnificently embody that gift? He held the power to bend others to his will so casually, though Naoe could never attain it no matter how he floundered; at times he envied Kagetora that power with ravening intensity. How cruel, then, was he to thrust the reality of Naoe's inferiority back into his face. And yet Naoe could not help but surrender to him...sometimes he shuddered with the humiliation.

(This, though he has not even regained his memories—...)

For a moment he felt the impulse to overturn all his loyalties into treason.

He wanted to throw Kagetora down, to conquer this proud man who knew no fear.

Naoe bit down on his lip and clenched his hands into fists. A feeling he had

forgotten.

The lust for conquest—

Perhaps this, above all, was the true face of his love.

Takaya stood.

He left without saying another word, his back a declaration, if unconscious, that he knew Naoe could never defy him—or that even if he did, Naoe would be no match for him...

At times the nobility of your back makes approach impossible, for it threatens the very self-respect of any who would try to follow you...

Your true self—overbearing, cunning, sublime—lies dormant within you.

And the mere glimpse of it from within his humiliation—

Was enough to ignite in him a predator's desire for the hunt...

Upon returning to his room, Takaya sent a [Gohou Douji](#) of the Sword to check on Sayuri. He planned to remain awake and alert until there was activity.

He went to call Naoe at one in the morning.

"Kagetora-sama."

"We're leaving now, Naoe."

Takaya's face was unsparing, grim—the expression of one who had cast away his personal feelings. This was not the usual Takaya; the expression he wore belonged, without any doubt at all, to Kagekura...

"Sassa Narimasa is here. Sayuri's noticed and is starting to grow violent. We can't let it go on like this. We're going now."

Takaya's 'Gohou Douji of the Sword' had spotted Narimasa at the Toyama Castle Ruins. Narimasa had entered Toyama that night, just as Rairen had predicted. When Takaya and Naoe arrived,

Narimasa was standing quietly at the foot of the castle tower without his nue following.

"Narimasa...!"

Naoe stopped the Celsior at the entrance, and he and Takaya dashed towards Narimasa. Having sensed the 'Gohou Douji of the Sword', he seemed unsurprised at their presence. Though they had

fought Narimasa just recently in Nara, he awaited them with unexpected calm.

"Uesugi-dono. So you came as well..."

He appeared to have been expecting them. Takaya, catching his breath, put aside his hostility towards the Oda commander for the moment to ask, "Did you come back here knowing about Sayuri? What are you planning to do about her?"

"..."

Narimasa, far from being agitated, displayed not the slightest change in expression. His clear almond-shaped eyes strayed towards the sandy river embankment. Even this far away they could distinctly feel the eerie malevolence of Sayuri and the [kaki](#) .

"I'm expected. I have no choice but to go."

"It's a trap, Narimasa," Takaya warned him urgently, "one created by the [Ikkou Sect](#) to lure you here. They're planning to bury you here."

"I know." Narimasa looked up, resolution in his eyes. "But I don't care what happens to me. This is between Sayuri and me. It has nothing to do with intervention from anyone else. This day was always going to come."

"But..."

"Have you allied yourself with [Kennyo](#) , Uesugi? Whatever the case, I'm not going to fight you here, not until I've settled things with Sayuri."

Takaya was taken aback. Narimasa had already prepared himself for this battle.

"Go tell [Kennyo](#) that a curse lies on you all for awakening Sayuri with your foul hands."

"Narimasa!"

"If that's what you think, then hurry to Sayuri's side!"

Another voice cut into their exchange, startling all present. They turned to see [Kousaka Danjou](#) appear out of the darkness.

"Rairen and his lot have been waiting for you. If you don't hurry, Sayuri will begin harming innocent people. You don't want this to get out of hand, do you?"

Narimasa's lips tightened as he held his surging emotions at bay, pretending calm, but for a second bloodlust glinted plainly in his eyes.

"I know not who you are... but 'tis not my intention to fight anyone at this moment. Allow me to present myself to you later."

"That's if you come back alive," Kousaka murmured, and smiled coldly. Narimasa bowed to the three of them, then turned on his heels and began walking towards Sayuri.

"Guess you scrapped Rairen's proposal, hmm?" Kousaka directed at Takaya and Naoe maliciously. Takaya glared back at him sharply.

"How the hell do you know about that?"

"Information can come from anywhere. Feh. If you'd accepted you could've done away with Narimasa. What complete bumpkins you are."

Naoe asked Kousaka warily, "Have you joined hands with Rairen?"

"Humph. Who would join hands with those reeking monks? The incense-stink would ruin my skin."

Takaya glared at Kousaka with open hostility. "So you're saying that Takeda isn't allied with the [Ikkou Sect](#)?"

"My. And is that what you want, Kage-tora-dono?" Kousaka scoffed at the tongue-tied Takaya and turned gracefully. "More importantly, shall we take our seats for the show?"

"You bastard..."

"You won't be able to see anything like this again soon—a lovers' spat over four hundred years in the making is about to begin."

Kousaka walked off. Takaya could attack only with his glare. What a disgusting guy, he thought, and followed.

"Naoe?"

He turned to Naoe, still frozen in place, deep in thought. Naoe came back to himself at the sound of his name.

"I'm coming."

Naoe was perhaps the one who came closest to guessing Narimasa's feelings, though even to think on them was painful. Who else could have realized how terrified Narimasa was beneath that expressionless mask?

Naoe understood Narimasa's state of mind—so well that it pressed like a weight against his heart. Though to say that he had made his own bed and was now lying in it was certainly not off the mark...

Narimasa was now setting out to confront his own greatest crime.

Sayuri's form abruptly superimposed itself over Takaya's.

(How will you face her...Narimasa?) he asked, almost tentatively. If he had

even a flicker of hope...

This person whom he had wounded beyond forgiveness...

This person who hated him so deeply, whom he loved more than any other...

(How will you face her?)

To You, My Beloved Chapter 5: Vow

Illusionary

cherry blossoms danced in the night wind at the 'sandy river embankment.' The blizzard of flower petals took him back to that day four hundred years ago.

That day, in the spring wind out of the north—

When he had looked down from his horse beneath sakura trees and white petals swirling in the air and laid eyes for the first time upon that beautiful maiden.

"What is thy name?"

And in the moment she had first looked up at him with her sweet smile—

"I am called Sayuri."

The sound of passing cars mingled with the murmur of the [Jinzuu River](#) . Narimasa stood at the foot of the bridge and gazed at the glow from the enormous "energy" Sayuri released into the darkness.

His sentiment for this place didn't go as deep as he had imagined.

Nothing of the castle town he had known remained now, after four hundred years. Only the sound of the river was unchanged.

Standing in the river breeze, Narimasa looked off into the distance, his

mind galloping back along the river to a long-past era.

Hundreds of years now since he had transferred to [Higo Province](#) by Hideyoshi's command—and died there, forced to commit seppuku after taking the blame for the revolt of the local clans. He had never imagined that he would be able to tread again on this land of Toyama.

In the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> he had taken [Kyuushuu](#) with [Higo](#) as his base, but the heavy responsibilities he bore as [kanshousha](#) and a commander of the Oda army had called him out of his territory to concentrate his efforts on destruction of the [Ikkou Sect](#) once they had started moving in the provinces around Kyoto—had it been two years ago?

But he had never set foot into [Toyama City](#) .

(Mayhap I was afraid of meeting thee...)

Of a guilty conscience.

He had, perhaps, simply been running away from Sayuri, the woman who had become an [onryou](#) out of hatred for him.

(What a coward I am.)

Even after four hundred years he had not forgotten her bitter cries.

Nor the things he had done here at this 'sandy river embankment.'

The memories came alive again.

"My lord, I beg thee to believe me!" Sayuri had pleaded, sobbing, her eyes clinging to his and long black hair disheveled and wild. *"I*

ne'er even dreamed of doing such a thing! I...have prayed day and night

for thy safe return. Only that! I have awaited thy return all this time...!" Sayuri had taken her life into her hands to plead her innocence against the heartless slander aimed against her even before the raging demon that he had become.

Sayuri...

I think I completely lost my mind...

Thou wouldst never have been in secret communication with anyone. More than any other, I, Narimasa, should have known the sincerity of thy heart.

Why did I believe such foolish slander from lips besmirched by jealousy?

"My lord...!"

Sayuri. I have not the right to explain myself to thee.

For Narimasa in those days of endless battle, pushed to his limit by the continual taking of lives on all sides, Sayuri's presence had been his only peace. In a sea of blood she alone had remained untouched.

She alone he had never wanted anyone to sully.

He had looked upon her bloody form out of demented eyes as he had slashed again and again into her skin. Sayuri. Even then thou wert

never stained. Thou art the eternally beautiful white lily of thy name.

Sayuri's heart-rending screams could not reach Narimasa. *Stop*, he too had screamed within his own mind, crying bloody tears, *stop this now*. But that voice, lost within his madness, could not reach him. Nothing could.

His lord Nobunaga's sudden death, internal strife, attack and defense against Hideyoshi, a succession of hard winters, the stillborn alliance with [Tokugawa Ieyasu](#) ...

And battle after battle. He had looked upon Sayuri, hanging blood-drenched from the hackberry tree, out of the depths of a dreamlike despair.

Mayhap neither thee nor any can understand what defense I may muster... E'en hope of such is, belike, naught but the hubris of a madman. 'Tis meet that none should understand, Sayuri, even thee...

And yet, Sayuri... How happy I was for the time thou wert beside me. Though it wert for but a passing moment, though I knew full well that I could not turn away from battle—no, because I knew it, the little time I spent with thee was so precious to me. The time we spent together in this land of Toyama... How dear to me thy warm smile as we stood within the gentle sunlight.

The knowledge that she would be waiting for him here had allowed him to leave those horrifying scenes of carnage behind him, to surmount any crisis. It had been his emotion sustenance. Her gentle smile was the image that he had called to mind in his pain.

Sayuri, thou wert my heart's home.

It was the only thing I could do. Battered mercilessly by the wind of misfortune, I dragged my weary body through the days of endless war with my life in my hands, clawing my way forward without a destination. I knew not even what to hope for. After the death of my lord I wore my soul away in the maelstrom of battle and conspiracy simply for the sake of staying alive.

But I had decided to battle my way through that world of subtle lies, a corrupt world that had lost all order. For it held one thing that could never be polluted. So I set myself to fight to protect that which should never be sullied—to protect thee from all their hardened hearts...

But I failed even that. In the end I was left with naught but the hollowness and hopelessness of a fruitless struggle. I saw no path remaining before me. And in the depths of my despair I heard the ugly slander of my family.

When those words thrust into my heart like a finishing blow, I felt as if a stain of darkness had covered all.

And something broke within me.

Sayuri, 'twas not that I did not believe thee. Nay, I prevaricate. I doubted even thee. I believed that thou had betrayed me. Even thee, my last pillar—

Wouldst even thou betray me? Would all deceive me, turn against me, abandon me?

I suspected everything and everyone, for suspicion breeds suspicion. I lost myself to hatred, rage, madness, wrapped in a delusion of victimization.

To such an extent that I cannot now recall the horrifying acts I performed in that state...

I could not believe thy pleas of innocence.

Thy last hate-filled gaze, my beloved, is burned into my retinas.

How absurd these self-justifications.

No words can erase the past. What a foolish man I am.

Sayuri—the lovely white lily that blooms alone in the snow fields of the tallest peak of Toyama's holy mountain in the harsh winter.

I never had the right to love thee.

Illusionary cherry blossoms scattered before him on the night wind—the storm of sakura petals from that day he first laid eyes on Sayuri...

After four hundred years, only the sound of the [Jinzuu River](#) was unchanged here at the sandy river embankment.

And now right in front of him—

The figure of his beloved, grotesquely transformed...

"Narimasa!"

Sayuri's hate exploded the moment Narimasa appeared. By the time Takaya

and Naoe caught up to him at a dead run, a courageous battle had already begun at the sandy river embankment.

"Aaah!" That single shout was all Takaya could manage as he froze at the sight, at a scene straight out of Hell. Narimasa stood on the embankment. Dark fire lashed at him, a fierce wind scythed down the sakura trees, and explosions jolted the ground.



Sayuri's long, deep hatred struck at Narimasa.

"You...!"

"We mustn't, Kagetora-sama!" Naoe checked him.

"Why?!" Takaya yelled. "He's gonna be killed if this goes on...!"

"Are you going to help Narimasa? Have you forgotten what we promised Rairen?!"

"Who the hell cares about that? They say jump and we ask how high?!"

"It'll be useless to interfere, Kagetora-sama! Why would you aid Narimasa? We *cannot* intervene!"

"'Why'...?!"

Takaya stopped and looked at Narimasa and Sayuri.

This was retribution, a natural recompense for the brutal acts Narimasa had performed. None who knew of the pain he had inflicted on her would condemn Sayuri for taking revenge. Indeed, Takaya, too, believed that Narimasa deserved to die at Sayuri's hands. Die and be cast into Hell for his unforgivable crimes...! He deserved this. He deserved to be flung into the lowest pit in Hell. And yet...!

(No...) Takaya clenched his fists. (Narimasa, you...!)

"Sayuri!"

Even engulfed by the dark flames of Sayuri's hatred, Narimasa faced her with unflinching determination. A razor whirlwind coiled around him, tearing into his flesh, and a mist of blood danced into the air. Narimasa attacked Sayuri relentlessly, but the <<power>> of Sayuri's hatred far surpassed Narimasa's.

Takaya and Naoe stood watching helplessly.

Sayuri flung each of Narimasa's attacks back into his face with twofold intensity, but he never faltered. It was almost as if he were trying to provoke her.

(Kill me, Sayuri!) The gut-wrenching cry tore again and again from Narimasa's throat. Come, rend me into a thousand pieces with your hatred!

He had come for this.

Yes, you're the reason I remained in this world. It was why I attained the power of [kanshou](#) , why I took this body capable of feeling the same anguish and agony as you did that day.

You're not satisfied, are you? Hurt me to your heart's content. Visit upon me the agony of Hell until your hatred is sated.

I do not ask for forgiveness. I don't entertain the foolish hope that you could forgive me. This is my desire, so fulfill yours. Let your hatred stop my next breath...!

"Let your hands cast me down to hell, Sayuri!"

Sayuri's demonic head danced madly, howling with rage or wild joy. A violent wind churned the river, and tornadoes tore countless trees out of the ground.

"What terrifying power..." [Shimozuma Rairen](#) stared with shock at the sight. The time was past when anyone or anything could come between them.

Narimasa's voice reached Naoe with perfect clarity. He stood frozen in place. All his animosity towards Narimasa had evaporated, leaving him hollow and heart-stricken by agonizing memories.

Let your hands cast me down.

For a moment Narimasa's words echoed with Kagetora's voice within his chest.

(Is it pleas for forgiveness that you want to wring from me?)

Naoe suddenly felt a flash of illumination.

The victim gained the right to shackle the one who had wronged him. Had Kagetora driven Naoe into his crime in order to bind him? Why did that thought grip his mind and refuse to let him go? Twined chains of love and guilt held him fast. Were you not satisfied until you could hold this over me? If so, then you are the self-serving one.

Kagetora had driven him forward with words sharper than any blade. Yet how many times had he thrust them deep into Naoe's body and mind?
Words

meant to shove him down. Words that had lashed him onward even as the

empty sky swallowed his screams. If you want your wishes to be granted, then scream them at me.

Hate consumed you even as you commanded me with that imperious look in your eyes.

"You are my dog, and I hold your leash." Such cold, arrogant eyes.

As if declaring *if you hunger so, then I shall turn my own body into bait to entice you.*

And he had howled the desire seething in his blood—

"I love you..."

Let the pain drive me mad!

For a moment his thoughts tuned themselves to the empty sky.

"This agony is the proof of my love for you—..."

"! ...Oh shit!"

Sayuri's ghostly storm began to lash out at the neighboring houses.

Roof tiles were blown away, and trees seemed in danger of being pulled out by their roots.

"Naoe! Put up a <<goshinha >>! We need to keep this contained!"

"...!"

Naoe, flung out of his thoughts, turned to Takaya, who concentrated his will and formed a <<goshinha >> around them. Naoe followed his lead. Their shields enclosed the

surrounding area in a veil of energy—but they would not be able to contain Sayuri's raging power for long.

"Guh...!"

Takaya and Naoe fought to remain standing in the face of Sayuri's overwhelming strength. They shielded themselves and held their ground, but it would be only a matter of time before that power exploded in their faces.

"Kagetora-sama! This is too dangerous! We can't hold on much longer...!"

"<<Choubuku >>, then...?!"

They had reached the limit of neutrality. Takaya formed the ritual gesture of Bishamonten . But at that moment—!

They covered themselves as something suddenly crashed into the ground in front of them like a bomb going off. They lifted their eyes to see Shimosuma Raishou standing before them.

"We told you not to interfere, Uesugi!"

"The deal's off!" Takaya shouted back coldly. "We said that we'd intervene if Sayuri was going to harm innocent people!"

"And you think we'll let you, *Yasha-shuu* ?!"

A violent "energy" sprang up around Raishou.

Rairen, who was observing Sayuri and Narimasa from a small distance away, whirled towards Raishou.

"You must not...! It's not time, Raishou!"

But the battle had already begun. Takaya and Naoe had squared off against Raishou with Sayuri's tempest whirling around them.

"Naoe, take the outer <<*goshinha* >>! Can you hold them both?"

"At your command!"

Naoe grasped Takaya's <<*goshinha* >>,

pouring every last drop of energy into holding both shields. Takaya commenced the offensive against Raishou, who had come here with the intention of using any chink in the armor of either Kagetora or the *Yasha-shuu* to bury them. Shooting off bolts of <<*nenpa* >>, he ran into Sayuri's ghostly storm.

Takaya shielded himself against the <<*nenpa* >>

crashing into the ground at his feet and gathered <<power>>

with all his might, shouting, "Get out of our way—!"

Boom!

The ground trembled with the thunderous explosion, and Raishou flinched away. Takaya kept his eyes on Raishou while he formed the symbol of

Bishamonten . But Raishou, guessing at his intent, pressed his hands together as Takaya envisioned the seed syllable of his god's name.

"We are the followers of the Buddha! Your accursed <<choubuku >> has no effect on us!"

"...!"

Raishou fervently chanted, "Namu Amida Butsu ". A white undulating "curtain of self-protection" surrounded Raishou.

(Amida's divine protection. Could it really...!)

Takaya evoked an outer bind with a sharp yell.

"bai!"

But it had no effect on Raishou. He smiled arrogantly even as he continued to chant the name of his deity. Disbelievingly, Takaya formed Bishamonten 's mudra once more.

"bai!"

"Your spells are useless against me, Uesugi! So now we know which of us is the true believer!"

"Hmph!" Takaya spat in disgust.

Meanwhile, Naoe was being overwhelmed by the power of Sayuri and the other wraiths.

(Is this too much to handle for me on my own...?!)

Sayuri's power combined with that of the kaki exceeded his. The increasing

pressure of their energy was filling the <<goshinha >> veil that enclosed them like a rubber balloon. If it broke, the

explosive release of power would probably blow away the residences and other buildings around them instantly.

(I am not going to let it happen...!)

But he couldn't hold on any longer!

(Is this as far as I can go?!)

"Looks like you could use a hand, Naoe!"

The <<goshinha >> suddenly stabilized. The speaker was Kousaka, and his <<goshinha >> now supported the other two.

"Kousaka, you...!"

"Never mind, go help Kagetora exorcise Raishou. Deal with 'em while they're distracted!"

"You didn't...!"

The pressure intensified within the <<goshinha >>.

Sayuri's savage attack had reached its peak. Narimasa, his body bloody and mangled, dropped to his knees and could not get up again.

Naoe turned to Takaya, who was narrowly holding his own against Raishou's concentrated attack.

"Kagetora-sama!" he yelled, shooting a <<nenpa >> towards Raishou, who faltered at the sudden attack. Takaya turned.

"Naoe! Hold him with an **outer bind** !"

"At your command!"

They cast paralysis on Raishou simultaneously. Raishou chanted with renewed fervor, but...!

"Ugh...!"

He gave a short moan as his body froze in place. Their double casting had taken effect. The tide had turned in their favor.

"**Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka** !"

Raishou struggled fiercely, but they chanted with increasing force: "**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten** ! For this demon subjugation, lend us thy power!"

Raishou chanted with silent desperation, but it could no longer save him. He screamed at Rairen for help. Rairen only stood looking at him coldly.

(This cannot be happening...!)

"<<**Choubuku** >>!" Takaya and Naoe cried in one voice. Flung out of his body, Raishou's soul disappeared into the light.

Next, Sayuri! Takaya thought, turning—then stopped, stunned and disbelieving.

"Naoe, look!"

"Wh...?"

Sayuri's ghostly tempest weakened rapidly and finally died, and the

dark tongues of spiritual energy brightened and cleared. A
blood-covered Narimasa lay sprawled upon the embankment.

The other spirits, too, had calmed. The demonic flying head quietly floated downward, and its body appeared.

Sayuri, clad in a white kimono, came to stand beside the unmoving Narimasa.

(Is he dead...?)

Sayuri's body glowed with pale light.

She looked down upon Narimasa, her face as beautiful now as it had been in her past life.

Perhaps saying that she was...satisfied.

She had killed Narimasa by her own hand. She had sent him to Hell. Perhaps now, with her vengeance accomplished, she could rest.

Narimasa's body stirred. He was not yet dead. With his last remaining strength Narimasa managed to lift his mangled upper body slightly.

"Sa...yuri..." he breathed. He coughed, and fresh blood splattered from his lips. Panting for breath, he looked up at Sayuri standing beside him.

"Take...me...with you..."

Sayuri gazed silently down at Narimasa, no trace of human expression or emotion on her face.

"...Sa...yu...ri..." Narimasa whispered. A single tear trickled down his hollowed, blood-blackened cheek.

"...I'm...sorry..."

He reached a red-stained hand towards her in a last silent plea. Sayuri only looked at him.

The other spirits floated away from Sayuri and flitted into the sky like the fireflies that had once danced above the [Jinzuu River](#) . They flew into the night sky and vanished one by one into the stars.

And then—

Sayuri's body, too, became a tiny light and slowly, soundlessly danced into the sky. Narimasa traced her light's path upward out of blurred and dimming eyes.

Sayuri's soul melted into the night sky and disappeared.

"Narimasa!"

Takaya and Naoe sprinted up to him. Takaya lifted Narimasa up into his arms, but his breaths were already growing fainter.

"Naoe! Call an ambulance!"

"...There's no need. He is already beyond our help..."

Narimasa's broken breathing steadied slightly as he looked hazily up at Takaya.

"So it's...turned out...exactly as...you planned..."

"What are you talking about?! We are *not* allied with the [Ikkou Sect](#) !"

"...Indeed...? In any case...we are...enemies..." he said, and coughed more blood. The mutilated ruins of his body forced onlookers to avert their gazes; to say he was covered with lacerations was true, but far from the reality. His face was white as paper from the loss of blood.

"...It seems...Sayuri...has already...ascended..."

"She's crossed over. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Ah..." A tiny smile appeared at the corners of Narimasa's lips.

"...Then...every...thing...is as...it should be..." He gathered the last of his strength and addressed Takaya: "Uesugi-dono, this body is...about to die. ...When it does...you'll be able...to perform...<<[choubuku](#) >> on me."

"Narimasa."

"...That's...what you wanted...is it not...? ...So...hurry and...do it. If you don't...I will...come back..."

Stunned, Takaya stared at Narimasa. "You're not... Are you saying you *want* us to perform <<[choubuku](#) >> on you?"

"Hah... What fool...ness..." His bloody grip on Takaya's shoulder belied the show of bravado.

"I...am...a comman...of...Oda. You think...you can...des....roy me...like..."

"Narimasa! Hey, Narimasa!"

His voice faded. With his last breath, his eyes sought the patch of sky into which Sayuri had disappeared. The sound of the [Jinzuu River](#) recalled distant memories to his mind.

His vision dimmed. Ah, soon... Narimasa thought. His consciousness receded. Death approached on silent wings.

Sakura drifted in the darkening world.

His last memory was of Sayuri's smiling face.

Narimasa's head dropped.

Takaya frantically shouted his name, but those eyes did not open a second time. Narimasa had breathed his last in Takaya's arms.

Kousaka, standing behind him, looked upon Narimasa's death without a hint of change in his expression. He said to Takaya, "Narimasa's soul has left his body. Now finish it with <<[choubuku](#)>> so he doesn't present us with further problems in the future."

Takaya made no move. He shook his head and responded dully, "There's no need."

"...?"

"Narimasa has returned to Sayuri's side."

Kousaka looked at him and seemed about to challenge his oddly self-assured statement, but Takaya was no longer listening.

Behind him, Naoe closed his eyes for a moment as if in silent prayer.

With Narimasa's body still in his arms, Takaya glared at the dark flow of the river.

If that body in Takaya's arms were his, Naoe thought as he stood watching over Takaya—

To die by his hand: he could think of no greater happiness. Any anguish, were it to come from him, would be transformed into the highest pleasure. If he could be forgiven...and then to end a life lived far too long...

Would that day ever come?

Perhaps only he, alone out of all of them, could see how happy Narimasa appeared in death...

The murmur of the river was loud in the still night as Shimosuma Rairen approached Takaya and Naoe.

Takaya snarled, "Rather unfair that Narimasa was the only to die, isn't it?"

"Please refrain. 'Tis not my intention to fight you here."

"And who was it who attacked us?!"

"Raishou was acting alone. He was commanded to protect the people in this area. He failed to fulfill his responsibilities."

"So you're just gonna lay all the blame on him?!"

"Not so. Raishou disobeyed his orders. I would guess that his intention from the start was to launch an attack against you, but he overestimated his own abilities. I would not have fought you even if you had intervened. I believe you had no choice but to use <<choubuku>>."

As Takaya straightened, boiling over with rage, Kousaka murmured coldly from behind him, "...Humph. Easy enough to say after the fact."

Rairen glared at him, his eyes filling for a moment with a killing fury. But he took a deep breath, and his expression settled into its calm mask once again.

"Let us meet again at some future date, at which time I shall entreat a battle with no holds barred on either side."

With those final words, Rairen turned.

"Wait a minute. Nobody said we're all just gonna go quietly home and forge about everything."

Rairen paused and looked over his shoulder. Takaya laid Narimasa's body on the ground and stood challengingly, his body filling with <<power>>.

"You're not walking away like this."

"...You are determined to settle this here?"

Takaya growled softly, staring at Rairen out of the tiger's wild,

fierce eyes: "I'm totally gonna regret it if I just let you leave like this."

"You would take revenge for Narimasa?"

"No," Takaya replied, poised for battle, "because I'm not gonna let you get away with using Narimasa and Sayuri's past in your schemes!"

"...!" Naoe started, caught off guard by Takaya's statement.

But Rairen was completely calm. He looked at Takaya quietly and replied, "Narimasa was not destroyed because we used his past against him..."

"What?" Takaya stared at him.

Rairen turned back to him and murmured, "He merely followed his own resolution to its conclusion."

"..."

After a last glance back at the frozen Takaya, Rairen walked off towards the bridge above the embankment. The wraiths of the [Ikkou Sect](#) disappeared after him, and quiet settled around them.

Naoe went to Narimasa's body and gently wiped the blood off his face with a handkerchief. Then he turned to Kousaka, still standing behind them.

"It was your intention to set us on those two from the start, wasn't it? Isn't that why you came?"

An efficient way to deal with both the Oda and the Ikkou commanders, completely without dirtying his own hand. In order to further the might of the Takeda...?

Kousaka smiled thinly. Without responding to the question, he suggested, "Why don't you shovel some of that suspicion on Rairen before piling it on me? Raishou was probably following Rairen's command from beginning to end."

"...What?"

"You'd probably be dead if Sayuri's power had gotten through your defenses."

Takaya and Naoe spun towards him, their faces stiffening. Kousaka smiled his ambiguous smile and turned on his heels. "Well then. Go ahead and make up a story for the police. This fellow will likely show up as a missing person on the family register. The investigation won't turn up much in any case, since he went and died a mongrel dog's death.

Takaya pinned him with a narrow-eyed glare. The corners of Kousaka's lips curved up in a smile. "We'll meet as enemies next time, my dear Uesugi.

With that parting shot, Kousaka descended the embankment and disappeared into the night. Fuming with indignation, Takaya and Naoe scowled after the sly strategist...

Only the two of them now remained at the sandy river embankment.

Listening to the quiet flow of the river, Takaya's gaze returned to Narimasa's body.

"Naoe," he said suddenly, and Naoe answered, "Yes."

Takaya whispered, still looking at Narimasa, "Don't...end up like this."

Stunned, Naoe looked at Takaya as those words cut him to the quick. "Kagetora-sama—..."

"Because from the...from the very first I was afraid you'd end up like this...trying to protect me." Takaya hanged his head, closing his eyes as if shutting out the unbearable sight of yet another death. "It's so unfair, someone dying like this. Everything's over if you die. You can't redo anything. Even if you think dying would be some sort of atonement..."

"Kagetora-sama."

"I hate this. I hate having things end this way. Swear to me, Naoe, that you won't die? That no matter what happens, you'll stay alive? Swear it...Naoe, promise me!"

"..."

"Don't let yourself be killed by anyone..."

Naoe only stared at him, eyes wide.

He moved ahead of reason, ahead of all thought. A finger stained with Narimasa's blood lifted Takaya's chin. The one being who was, to him, the Absolute, looked back at him, eyes wavering in his bewilderment.

"Naoe—...?"

He gazed straight into Takaya's eyes, resistance crumbling away within him. And then he leaned forward, their eyes still locked.

But the dregs of his reason stopped him at the last moment.

Taut silence froze them in place.

"..."

Naoe tore himself away.

Takaya stared at him wide-eyed, hardly breathing. Naoe looked back at him out of tormented eyes.

"Then...bind me..." Naoe answered, his voice a moan. "Chain me to you so tightly that I will never be able to free myself. Then...I will never leave you again. And until you kill me, I will never be killed by anyone."

Takaya held his breath, still frozen in place.

Naoe barely managed to choke back the next words and the next.

Tears welled from his eyes. He looked down, biting his lip, trying to hold them back, tasting blood.

Takaya stared with shock at Naoe as if he had forgotten all language.

Naoe looked up, a wordless disquiet suddenly stabbing into his chest.

Takaya opened his mouth, and he quickly reached out and touched Takaya's chin as if to forestall him.

"...You..."

Naoe didn't pull back a second time, and his lips stole the word from Takaya's. Caught completely by surprise, Takaya's hand moved as if to thrust him away, but Naoe caught it and held it fast.

Regret...

The feeling flooded him, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing else he *could* have done.

Should I bite off your tongue before it can send me away? Could I be happy then?

My eyes see nothing. I cannot go on living in this agony.

I want to drown in my insatiable desire for you, to love every part of you.

There is...no turning back...

To You, My Beloved Chapter 6: To You, My Beloved

Thus concluded the case of Narimasa and Sayuri.

Naoe took Takaya back to the hotel, then returned to deal with the cleanup on his own. Since there was a body, he contacted the police first and spent half a day being questioned and going through police procedures. Telling the truth was, of course, out of the question, so he constructed a story around having come upon the body by accident. His experience stood him in good stead, and the matter was adeptly resolved.

Narimasa's host body did turn out to be a John Doe after all, and the investigation would not trouble Naoe and Takaya further.

Patrol cars and curious bystanders swarmed the embankment torn apart by

Sayuri's wrath until evening, but not one of them could have realized that the man who had died in front of the lone hackberry tree was the [Sassa Narimasa](#) of Sayuri's tale.

And none of them knew that the story had now at last come to its end.

Only—

The drifting 'Sayuri Fire' would never again be seen at the 'sandy river embankment'.

Naoe returned to the hotel a little after four in the afternoon. Takaya had been there since that morning.

No conversation had taken place between them, afterwards. Takaya, wrapped in stunned silence, had probably been completely incapable of comprehending the meaning of Naoe's actions. No—even if he had understood, he had probably already blocked them out after half a day spent in a perfectly ordinary hotel.

Afraid? Oh yes, he was afraid of Takaya's reaction.

He had even entertained the possibility of Takaya checking out of the hotel and going back to [Matsumoto](#) on his own, but when he inquired at the front desk, the concierge

confirmed that Takaya was still in his room. With that weight off his mind, he headed up. But...

(However should I face him...?)

Naoe stopped in front of the room, hesitating with a hand lifted to knock.

What did Takaya think of what he had done? Takaya's petrified reaction flashed across the back of Naoe's mind. Yes, his actions had been impulsive, completely spur-of-the-moment—but *why* had his rational mind not stopped him?

Gut-wrenching regret thrashed within his chest.

(Either way, I cannot take it back...)

Steeling himself, he quietly donned his expressionless mask and knocked on the door.

There was no answer. No matter how many times he knocked, the door remained shut. Takaya evidently had no desire to see him. Naoe let his hand drop.

He could sense Takaya standing on the other side of the door.

Takaya was there, just a few feet away, but he could not bring himself to open the door. Perhaps he had as little idea how to face Naoe as Naoe had to face him.

Better that he doesn't open it, Naoe told himself silently, and made his report across the door.

"Everything has concluded smoothly. Narimasa's body was taken to the hospital. I believe the investigation will be brief. There will probably be inquiries into his identity, but it would be best to let the police take care of the rest."

Takaya made no reply. The very silence thrust like a blade into his heart. Building a protective wall around himself out of his reason, Naoe delivered the rest of his report in a detached and business-like voice.

"I plan to check out of the hotel and do some reconnaissance around the Noto region...if you have no objections?"

Takaya gave no answer to his question. Taking in the silence expressionlessly, Naoe added, "...I have left traveling expenses for your return trip at the front desk. I apologize for putting you through

the trouble of coming out here."

He heard the knob turning as he was about to take his leave. The door opened.

Naoe's eyes widened, his heart pounding again. Takaya stood looking up at him.

"...Running away?"

Naoe's shoulders twitched. He felt as if Takaya had seen right through him

But it no longer shook him.

"And you?" he asked calmly. "...are you not afraid of keeping a man like me at your side?"

Takaya pinned Naoe with a narrow-eyed stare. Naoe's perfect impassivity did not waver. Takaya searched its depths, seeking the sincerity within his silence, but before he could find what he sought Naoe abruptly looked down with a sneer.

"It's futile. The convenient answer you seek does not lie within me."

"..."

"You are laboring under a misconception."

"What?"

"You wish to quietly explain away the things I've done... And you mistakenly think it is an expression of your sympathy towards me."

Takaya stopped breathing, his eyes wide. Naoe persisted, smiling with cool defiance, "Do you know...what it is I want to do right now?"

"..."

The pupils of Takaya's eyes flared red-hot with rage. Naoe wanted to stare into them until that rage exploded into hatred.

Takaya demanded in a stifled, wary voice, "—You...just what the hell are you?"

Pleasure jolted Naoe as their eyes locked in a glaring content so intense that both their breaths caught. This was a battle far crueler than that between mere flesh and bone, Naoe thought, his lips curving in masochistic glee.

"I am your dog."

"..."

"Your 'mad dog.'"

Takaya shuddered, frozen in place as Naoe's gaze pierced him. Yes, that coldness peculiar to Naoe which so wounded him, which seemed to carry so much hatred towards him—that coldness and cruelty was staring him in the face here and now.

Why were his clenched fists shaking so? Takaya could not begin to understand, to name the feelings welling up inside him. How *could* he understand it all?

This love so nearly hate that one was indistinguishable from the other—such an emotion was completely alien to Takaya. He had no answer

to give Naoe, who made no move to leave. He could only stand there, seething with anger.

(Don't make me be alone again.)

He would never let himself go back to being alone. Naoe gazed with pity at the wordless Takaya.

(There is nothing I can do but end this...)

He saw only ruin.

This path that led him endlessly back toward the errors of his past—he saw nothing at its terminus but destruction.

I betray you with this love. Without it I cannot go on living.

If only you would bind me more tightly to you.

If I knelt and abased myself before you in my defeat, my submission, would you be willing to kill me with your cold, triumphant smile then?

To throw away your kindness and lay bare your true cruelty...

And transform my humiliation into wracking pleasure—

You, my only dictator...

(Let me end this...)

Naoe closed his eyes, bracing himself against the tidal wave of madness and the battery of conflicting emotions with all his might.

There was still time. He could stop this insanity. If he didn't want the past to repeat itself, he had but one choice...

Here, now, he could kill it all.

"...!" Naoe gasped, staring uncomprehendingly at what he could never have imagined. Takaya was looking straight at him, tears falling drop by silent drop from his eyes.

"Kagetora-sama..."

Takaya made no effort to conceal them. Hands clenched into fists, biting down hard on his lip, he glared at Naoe, a desperate plea in his eyes.

The last remaining shard of gentleness shattered within Naoe. He loved this being standing before him with a passion beyond all forgiveness, with such intensity that he could not breathe. Out of hatred so deep that hatred itself was transcended sprang a love approaching madness...

He reached out and tilted Takaya's chin, a finger tracing his lips. He seized the wrist of the hand raised to push him back and pressed his lips hard against Takaya's.

"...ah!"

The devouring kiss was so single-minded that it resembled a desperate sort of sorrow. Yet Takaya gasped against Naoe's lips as he struggled frantically to break away.

"Let...go...of me...!"

The words were muffled and slurred between their lips, and Takaya flailed against Naoe in vain. Little by little the wave of emotions crested past their breakwaters. Takaya closed his eyes against the violent onslaught that could no longer be held back. Tears continued to slide down his cheeks from beneath his eyelids.

When Naoe finally moved away, Takaya remained standing stiffly, painfully where Naoe had left him, his eyes tightly shut.

Naoe quietly looked down at him. His reason scythed down his howls of anguish before they could reach his lips. Holding the emotions threatening to overwhelm him again at bay with its cruel blade, Naoe murmured slowly as he gazed at Takaya: "That was a lie..."—*my love*.

"..."

He repeated the words as if pronouncing judgment on himself, "All of my feelings until now have been a lie..."

Tears glistened on Naoe's cheeks. Takaya's eyes widened. He had never before seen Naoe cry. Why did his heart ache so at the sight? Why? He couldn't think. The judgment Naoe had passed on himself melted into heartbreak in his smile. He stepped back from Takaya, then turned and walked away.

He could not allow himself to turn back.

He had to end this. He had no other choice.

He buried those unattainable yearnings deep in the abyss of his heart.

If he could not abandon himself to destruction...perhaps he would go on like this after all, carrying the ashes of his dead heart within him...

Silence settled into the room.

Takaya slowly turned from the door out of which Naoe had disappeared and looked towards the window. Rain was falling.

He clenched his fists, biting his lip as he watched the sudden evening shower veil the city in a smoky haze.

He began to shake helplessly.

END

Frozen Wings Chapter 1: Sirius

A single cigarette glowed in the darkness.

"Come on, hurry up and do it already," he dared the grade school-aged boy, whose nerve-wracked face, not yet grown out of its childhood roundness, emerged out of the darkness in the tiny dot of cigarette light.

"...What, you scared?"

The boy's hands were shaking, his face stiff with terror. He whispered into the boy's ear, a jeering smile at the corners of his lips, "Are you that afraid of hurting your own body? Is it really that scary, burning yourself?"

The boy froze, the cigarette in his right hand hovering over the back of his left. That tiny cigarette end easily topped four hundred degrees Celsius.

"...You're still just a baby," he snorted a laugh, grabbing the boy's hand. "*This* is how you do it."

He pressed it with the cigarette down against his own left hand.

"Uwah!"

The cry had come from the boy. The heat flashed through the top of his head. He shut his eyes tightly and endured in silence. They smelled

burnt skin.

The terrified boy jumped back and stared at him. The cigarette fell to the ground, scattering ash. Pressing against his burnt left hand, he sucked in a tight breath and smirked at the boy, eyes flashing.

"If you can't even do this, then you've got no right hanging around here, kid. Why don'tcha go on home and get into the bath with your mama like the baby you are?"

Looking more afraid of him than of what he had just done, the boy backed away and quickly disappeared. He slumped back against the wall right hand pressed against the throbbing burn on his left as the boy's footsteps rapidly receded.

"...Ha. What a weakling."

"Ougi."

He looked blankly out into the darkness at the sound of his name.

Mitsui, at eighteen his senior by four years, stood in front of the garage looking at him.

"What?"

"Drove that crew-cut out already, huh? Thought I'd finally get to debut him, but you keep running 'em off."

"That kid's way too soft."

Mitsui gave him a faint, amused smile.

"First graders are supposed to be soft. You not goin' home? It's past midnight."

"I'm here *because* I don't wanna go home," Takaya retorted, lighting a new cigarette in a well-practiced gesture. "Who'd wanna ever go back there? Fucking bastard."

"... You've got a younger sister, don't you? You gonna just leave her with your old man after he has a few? That's pretty rough, man."

"Miya went to stay with our neighbors a week ago."

"Go see her, then."

Takaya sighed, exhaling cigarette smoke, and glared up at Mitsui. "What the hell are you complaining about? Why don't you stop sticking your nose into other people's business and go have some drinks inside?"

"... Humph, look at the junior high brat trying to talk back like he's on the same level as us."

Mitsui sat down next to him and held out a plastic bag containing a small amount of a clear liquid.

"Pity you don't drink. Guess this is the only thing left if you can't get drunk."

Takaya looked coldly at the bag, then snorted a laugh and took it. He pressed his mouth against the opening and inhaled the vapor inside. The familiar intoxication spread from his head to his chest, then throughout his body.

"... You got anything better?"

He fixed cold, glazed eyes on Mitsui.

"I know some guys who've got some uppers. I'll put you in touch if you wanna do it."

"You just want a lab rat 'cause you don't wanna do it yourself. Humph, what a coward."

"Damn right. I'm just a bystander who enjoys watching fools making a mess of themselves. I'm looking forward to seeing how far you'll fall."

"... Guess I'll fulfill your expectations then," Takaya sneered. "Just keep laughing at me."

"Hmn. My room's free, you can use it if you're cold. We've got girls over in the garage, so it's getting crowded. You don't like that kinda stuff, do you?"

"If you're gonna be mixing it up, you'd better let me have a piece of the action."

"Drop the act. When you're ready to throw your virginity away, I'll be sure to give you a personal lesson."

Takaya snorted, eyes glassy. "Screw you, jerk."

"I'm gonna shut that fresh mouth of yours up, too." Mitsui crouched and yanked Takaya's head up by the hair. "...Go wait in my room," he said, and went back into the garage. Eyes following him, Takaya took another deep breath from the plastic bag. His shoulders began to shake as he

laughed, immersed in a feeling of well-being, his head tilted back against the wall.

"Who the hell wants to get screwed by you?" he sniggered, eyes heavy, no longer feeling the pain from the burn on his left hand. He leveraged himself upright, swaying as he stared at the blurring lights of the city glowing from the darkness.

He had nowhere to go.

Would he rather die like this by the side of the road? he wondered as he started walking unsteadily. The Orion constellation twinkled in the cold sky. Was it that late already?

His parents had gotten divorced about a year and a half ago, right around the time he entered junior high. His father had gone berserk when he had lost his business with a large loan still unpaid and started binge-drinking on a daily basis. His mother, unable to endure the violence in that horrible house, had divorced his father. She was now remarried and living in Sendai.

Ougi Takaya was currently a second year student at Fukushima Junior High School, and his younger sister Miya was still in elementary school. His father had repaid about half of the loan after selling the house, but his prospects for repaying the other half were slim to none. He had gone downhill again recently and was now obsessing over some woman,

even bringing her home some days.

He erupted into violence at the smallest provocation and took everything out on his children. Even as he endured the cursing and swearing and abuse, Takaya had resolved to take Miya out of that house That had happened a week ago.

After Miya had been taken in by their neighbors, Takaya had stayed with various acquaintances. But he didn't have that many friends, and had finally ended up at this garage.

As usual, his father was drinking. After the divorce, he had managed to get re-employed several times, but had never been able to continue for long, and spent what little money he earned on alcohol and women.

They fought whenever they saw each other. Takaya would have borne it if his father had only taken it out on him, but he could not forgive him for raising his hand against even Miya. And then he had brought a woman home. Takaya had lain sleeplessly through the night to the sound of his father's obscene bellows coming right from the next room, and at dawn, looking at Miya's face streaked by tears even in her sleep, had desperately held back a killing rage.

How many days had it gone on like that?

He couldn't hope for anything from his relatives or the other adults around him. They had turned their backs as soon as money became involved; he could ask them for nothing. He had not the least intention of doing so.

Only—he had Miya. He had to protect his sister, no matter what it took.

The home which should have been his sanctuary had become a battleground

that held no place of rest. He had taken up smoking to calm nerves stretched to the breaking point and adopted a tough facade outside to cover up the injuries he received at home.

He had met Mitsui, leader of the largest gang in the area, last winter.

Mitsui would be in his third year of senior high now if he had continued school, but had dropped out after the first year. Takaya didn't know what he did during the day, but had heard that he was a fringe part of some mafia group and ran errands for them. He gathered his gang by night at the garage and threw wild parties with girls and drinking. Takaya had met him when he'd gotten into a fight with one of the gang members; afterwards, he became the only junior high member of

the group to talk to Mitsui on an equivalent basis. Stealing, extortion, and motorcycle-riding were some of the things they had taught him.

But Takaya, who had always been something of a lone wolf, had never enjoyed doing things with other people, and could often be found smoking or inhaling paint thinner by himself, off in his own world.

Rather than wanting to be with Mitsui's gang, he seemed to simply want somewhere to be.

Before he realized it, he found himself with cigarettes and a cheap

knife constantly in his pockets—though he had only ever hurt someone with the knife once. That person had been Mitsui, who had stepped in to stop the fight between Takaya and his underling. Mitsui still bore that scar above his eye. That was the only time he had actually used the knife against another person, but somehow it made him feel better just to have it with him.

Even now Takaya's hand was wrapped around its hilt in his pocket.

Takaya left Mitsui's garage and tottered alone down the dark streets.

Insulated by the thinner he had inhaled, Takaya didn't feel the cold of Matsumoto's November wind. Or perhaps it was the simmering hatred he felt towards his father as his hallucinations called to mind the beatings he had received.

(All of this...is because of him.)

He gripped the knife in his pocket tightly. *Tonight*, Takaya thought.

Miya was no longer there. He could go back to the house and kill the bastard tonight.

I can never escape from him. So long as he's my father, so long as he's alive, I can't run away from him like Mom did.

He would be captured after killing his father, sent to the juvenile detention center...there was no path ahead of him that did not lead downward. But there would never be any worth to his life anyway, so he might as well kill the bastard. Better for Miya that way, too.

(Nobody needs me.)

He glared up at Sirius twinkling in the night sky with murder in his eyes.

I'll kill him...

A car passed him, and for a moment its lights fascinated and dazzled him. He returned its taillights' glower as the cold winter wind swirled up from beneath his feet to ruffle his hair.

He tied the knife hilt tightly to his right hand with a handkerchief and concealed it in his pocket. His mind, seething with thoughts of murder, took no notice of the frozen wind from the north.

(Once you've killed one person, is there any difference in killing two or three...?)

Why not stab the ones he passed along the way too?

He climbed the dark hill road, dizzy from the thinner.

His mind circled back continuously to images of his father's swinging fists. The way he'd been punched and kicked into ragged tatters for expressing the slightest opinion. The way he'd been hit again and again for a hate-filled glare out of a bloody face. "I'll not have you looking at me like that!" his father had yelled. Miya had been screaming. "Dad, stop! Please stop!" He'd truly thought that he was

about to die when his father had raised the kitchen knife. He'd been so terrified that he couldn't even run. That was when the neighbors, concerned about the noise, had entered to intervene.

He trembled with humiliation and fear. There were too many such memories.

All of it was his fault, he snarled into the night. All of it, that bastard's fault.

(I'm gonna kill him.)

For an instant fallen and scattered leaves formed a black beast in the darkness. Startled, he reflexively whipped the knife out of his pocket before realizing that it existed only in his imagination. Breathing a sigh of relief, he took a step and stumbled against a crack in the pavement. He fell forward, unable to catch himself, and landed with the point of his own knife right in front of his eyes, its chill glint sending a shiver down his back.

"Guh..."

He snapped out of his daze, disgusted with his shameful fear. Was this what someone supposedly on his way to committing a murder should look like...?

Lying where he had fallen, he laughed wretchedly at himself for his hopelessly pathetic bumbling. This jumping at shadows was evidence of his own ridiculous cowardice.

(I'm just a stupid kid...) he mocked himself bitterly.

Nothing but a pathetic little wet-behind-the-ears kid.

As quiet fell once more around him, he suddenly heard what sounded like someone sobbing.

(What...?)

He strained his ears, and—yes, he was sure of it. Even in his dazed state it made him get up and look around, wondering what was going on so late at night. He was in a residential area, and pretty much everyone was quietly asleep in the houses around him. There weren't many with light still on. But he heard that convulsive sobbing again, quite clearly, from one of the houses in front of him.

(Could it be an auditory hallucination...?)

He finally found the house in question and walked up to it. It was completely dark. The voice seemed to be coming from the garden, and he peered into it through the fence.

The sobbing was coming from a crouched boy who looked to be around junior high school age.



(What's with him...?)

What was this kid doing at this time of night? he wondered, mystified. Was he a ghost? He shivered.

The boy turned as he sensed Takaya's presence, and the streetlights illuminated his face.

This was no ghost.

(What the? He...)

He looked familiar.

(He was in my class last year...)

Takaya couldn't immediately put a name to the face. The boy was the first to speak.

"Ou...gi...?"

He looked just as surprised as Takaya. The sound of his voice triggered Takaya's memory.

"You're...Narita...right?"

Hurriedly scrubbing his tear-streaked face with a sleeve, Narita Yuzuru stood.

"Why were you crying...?"

"I-I wasn't crying."

Yuzuru still looked young enough that he had often been mistaken for an elementary school student until just recently, though he was in his second year of junior high. They'd been in the same class in their first year, but had spoken pretty much not at all. Ougi Takaya could barely put a name to Yuzuru's face, since he'd started skipping school on a regular basis midway through and probably couldn't even properly be called a classmate. —Narita Yuzuru, on the other hand, knew somewhat

more about Takaya, who was, after all, a rather conspicuous student. Actually, there were few in the school who didn't know him—or rather, of him and his reputation for being first on the problem children list.

(Why is he here?) both of them wondered, staring at each other. Takaya suddenly realized—

"Oh, right, I guess this is your house, huh?" He pondered for a moment.

"So why were you crying?"

Yuzuru glared at Takaya, eyes bright red. His eyes caught at something behind Yuzuru: a mound which looked like it had something buried inside.

"What is that...?"

Yuzuru turned slightly and replied, "My bird's grave—..."

"Your bird...? So that..." Takaya returned, looking completely nonplussed, "*that's* what you were crying over?"

Yuzuru rubbed at the corners of his eyes again and sniffled. "She's not a *that*. She's been with me for a long time. Is it that weird that I'm crying over her?"

"It is that weird, stupid," Takaya answered in amazement. And here he'd been wondering what was going on, so late at night. He felt like an idiot, and it infuriated him. Were there really junior high students who still cried like this over a dead bird in the middle of the night?

"If you're gonna cry over something like that, then you'd have to cry all night long if you had roast chicken for dinner, wouldn't you? You still in elementary school or what? Aren't you ashamed of yourself at all?"

"Shut up!" Yuzuru scowled fiercely at him. "You've got no right to talk like that when you don't know anything! Sure she was just a bird, but I loved her! She was finally going to lay eggs, but because I didn't help her in time...! If I'd noticed and treated her, she wouldn't have died...! It was my fault, that's why—!"

"..."

Takaya looked at Yuzuru, slightly surprised. Yuzuru suddenly recalled who he was talking to. He shrank slightly into himself.

"Um...I..."

Takaya stared at the bird's grave. His right hand tightened slightly on the knife hidden in his pocket. —What the hell?

Why the hell did he have to meet someone like this when he'd been on his way to killing his own father? Someone crying outside on a cold night just because he'd let a bird die...

Takaya was truly angry. Beyond angry.

"You're an idiot. It's not like she was a woman."

"Wh...!"

"What a baby. Look at you sprouting waterfalls for a bird. Anything alive is gonna die someday, moron. They die when it's time for them to die. If you're gonna cry and scream over every little thing, then you'll never stop."

"Wh, what did you say?!"

"You know I'm right, blockhead. There's lots of scum the world'd be better off without. They should all just go and die already. Then nobody'd have to look after them, and they'd stop bothering everyone. The world would be a much better place. They should all die, every one

of them should just drop dead!"

"You..." Yuzuru said haltingly as if he had somehow seen right through Takaya—"what are you carrying in your pocket?"

Takaya started.

Yuzuru's round eyes were looking straight at him. He inadvertently looked away and pushed the knife deeper into his pocket.

Then Takaya's eyes flashed again, and he glared warily at Yuzuru. It frightened Yuzuru a little, but even so he asked timidly, "Is it that...you can't go home?"

Takaya's shoulders quivered as if he'd been struck. Yuzuru approached him. "Do you...not have anywhere to go?"

Though nervous, there was also worry in Yuzuru's voice. "Aren't you...cold? If you are..."

"...!"

This kid pitied him, he suddenly thought. Takaya abruptly turned his back on Yuzuru and started walking away.

"Um, wait. Ougi!" Yuzuru hurriedly climbed over the fence and chased after him. "Wait! Wait a moment!"

Takaya ignored him and kept going.

"Ougi!"

Yuzuru unexpectedly pulled on his right arm, and his hand wrenched out

of his pocket. Yuzuru's eyes abruptly widened. Takaya's feet stopped for a moment.

(He saw it...!)

He thrust Yuzuru off with all his might, and Yuzuru staggered away with a shriek, releasing Takaya's arm. Takaya started running. He wanted to get away from Yuzuru just as fast as he could. He ran until he could no longer hear Yuzuru's voice. He had come to a small park.

(*This...*)

He struck his right hand against a wall again and again, the knife in it clutched so tightly for so long that his fingers would not loosen their grip. He beat his hand against the wall until the handkerchief securing the knife to his hand was stained red with blood—until the handkerchief slipped off in the same instant the knife broke at the hilt with a *clink*. It grazed past Takaya's cheek and fell to the ground.

He looked at the knife blade, panting.

(He saw *this*...)

Not simply the knife, but his repugnance towards it. His gutlessness. Yuzuru had seen through to his weakness.

He fell to his knees on the ground, still staring at the broken knife.

(He...)

He hit the ground with his fists. He couldn't bear it. He couldn't

stand that a kid like that, a sheltered brat, had seen his weakness.

His cowardice disgusted him.

(I'm not gonna let him get away with it!)

He couldn't let it end like this. If he didn't do something to that kid—that's right, see if he didn't erase him...!

"Ougi."

He whirled at the voice calling his name. Narita Yuzuru stood beneath the park's street lamps, out of breath. That he had followed Takaya here startled him for a moment, but he immediately fixed Yuzuru with a hate-filled glare.

Yuzuru, transfixed by fear, could only manage in a small voice, "Ah...um..."

"What did you come here for?" he snarled as menacingly as he could, but in reality it was Takaya himself who was afraid. "Go home, you stupid moron, or I'll beat you to a pulp."

"But, your hand, it's bleed..."

"Did you not fucking hear me? I'm gonna beat you up!"

The threat achieved its desired effect, and Yuzuru backed away and left the park. Takaya bit his lip hard. His fists, clenched so tightly that they were bloodless, trembled. Someone like that had seen his weakness,

the side of himself that no one else had even glimpsed. This cowardice which he refused to admit to anyone... The knife which was its flip

side, the secret no one else knew about.

It was utterly humiliating that someone like that had guessed it—had seen it...!

His killing hatred towards his father, which had held him so tightly in its controlling grip, evaporated. The humiliation that had seized him was so strong that it had wiped away every other feeling. It immediately transformed into a perverse one-sided hate towards Yuzuru.

Clawing at the ground as his wounded pride howled, Takaya shot a glare burning with hatred into the darkness.

(That little punk...)

Sirius' light pierced the empty sky.

The cold wind snapped against his skin and roared past his ears.

Frozen Wings Chapter 2: Glass Fangs

Two days later...

Ougi Takaya showed up at school near noon that day, for the first time in perhaps three weeks. For the hyper-sensitive student body, his presence alone was enough to elevate the tension within the school.

The students he passed in the corridor whispered about him behind his back, seemingly ignorant of the fact that their gossip carried easily to his ears. Takaya knew that he was regarded not only by the teachers but by his fellow students as a nuisance. *Here comes trouble*, their eyes told him.

Takaya was already used to it. He'd only look like a fool if he gave any sign that the anger and contempt in those stares mattered to him now. If I pay them any attention, I lose. He coldly closed his heart against them and walked on expressionlessly.

"Been about three weeks since you last came to school, hasn't it, Ougi."

He stopped and glanced around at the deep, harsh voice. Its owner was Oonuki, the guidance counselor, who was wearing his usual trousers (which always looked like the same pair), threadbare necktie, and overbearing expression. Rumor claimed that he was the hen-pecked husband of a woman from one of the old families, and took his shame and

resentment towards being adopted into his wife's family out on the

students.

He always carried an elastic stick pointer, which he habitually brandished at the students. Today it was already fully extended.

"You think pretty highly of yourself. So you come to school when you feel like it, leave when you lose interest?"

"..."

He tapped the pointer lightly against Takaya's cheek. "Looks like you haven't been home, hmm? Go out and have fun every night, do you?"

He averted his face from Oonuki's foul breath. "So how about this rumor that you're hanging around Mitsui? Is it true?" Oonuki pressed indifferently.

Takaya lifted his eyes slightly, and Oonuki snorted a laugh. Even his gaze felt slimy, as if he were running his tongue all over Takaya's face.

"Up to no good in any case, hmm? If you're keeping company with feeble-minded trash like that—well, I guess it's true what they say about birds of a feather and all that."

"..."

"What were you doing last night? Riding a motorcycle? Extortion? Drugs? You remember lots about it, I bet? What happened to that hand?"

He wrenched Takaya's burnt left hand forward. Takaya glared fiercely back at him.

"They're teaching you nothing good, I'm sure. You'd better get your head on straight, and fast. Or do you want to become the trash of society like them?" the counselor scoffed, then thrust his hand into Takaya's pocket and grabbed his last few remaining cigarettes. He held the crushed sticks up in front of Takaya's face.

"If you want to straighten yourself out, come to the teachers' room after school for counseling. There are quite a few things I want to talk to you about. ...Your loss if you don't show up."

Oonuki gave Takaya a thin, vicious smile before continuing down the corridor. Fuck you, you asshole, Takaya snarled inwardly as he looked at the man's back, when a student spoke from next to him.

"You're better off not going."

He turned to see Kayama from the next class, another student who stood out. The hair above his thin face was blond, and so wavy that it made his face look lumpy. Takaya knew that his friends made fun of him for it and called him "the gold bird's nest". He was in Takaya's year, and belonged to the so-called "Yankee^[1] Gang", a group Takaya didn't really have anything to do with. He recognized Kayama, but that was as far as it went.

"The last time I went to the teachers' room, he preached at me until dark. If you look rebellious or whatever, he'll hit you for complaining. And he tries to touch the girls. Have you heard? A girl he called in the other day, he made her take her clothes off in front of

him, and now she's skipping. The school doesn't know the real reason, though."

"... Not like I was planning to go in the first place."

Kayama smiled hopefully. "I knew it. You're with Mitsui-san's group, aren't you? I heard. He's *that* guy, right? The one who dropped out right after entering senior high?

People're saying that he got scouted by the professionals and that he carries the Seiyuu Group's silver badge. Man, that's so cool. That means he's an associate member of the mafia, right?"

Takaya looked at Kayama warily. Kayama leaned back against the wall with an obsequious smile.

"I heard you deal with him as an equal. You're pretty special. And you don't hang with anyone, either. But..." he looked out of the window.

"You should be careful in the school, you know? 'Cause there're some people who don't like hearing about you getting too close to Mitsui-san."

"What're you talking about?"

"Some third years. Yokomori and Ichinose and their lot. They don't got Mitsui-san's brains, and they're always fawning over him, so if they knew that someone younger than them is part of his gang, they'd be pretty pissed. They'd think you were stealing their place or something."

"Humph, so they're gonna try taking me on or something?"

"They're jealous. It's humiliating for them, 'cause it's like 'you punks couldn't get in, hah!' or something. But they seem to think Mitsui-san can't interfere inside the school, so they can just do whatever. Eh, it's better leave stupid things like that alone, but I'm just telling you that that's what I hear."

Takaya's expression was cold. Yokomori and Ichinose—they'd called him out last year for being 'impertinent' and 'rude'. It'd been such a stupid idea for him to get into a fight with them, but they'd run off with their tails between their legs at the first hint of a threat. So they probably didn't have any fond memories of him anyway.

(This is so stupid...they can do whatever the hell they want.)

Takaya sighed. "Thanks for that, Kayama."

"Hey you don't have to thank me! I don't want you to lose either."

Takaya's brows knit at Kayama's eager smile.

"They think they can throw their weight around just 'cause they're a year older, and it pisses us off too. But you're special, so I hope you'll smash their noses in or something. I mean, well, that's just the modest hope of a common Yankee..."

What a weird guy, Takaya thought to himself, inclining his head. A group of friends appeared from the stairwell.

He started.

(Narita—...)

The other boy had noticed him as well. Their eyes met, and Takaya's expression hardened. He was terrified of Yuzuru having told anyone else about that night. He secretly shuddered at the thought that Yuzuru might try to speak to him here.

Hurried on by his friends, Yuzuru entered the classroom. Though slightly relieved, Takaya glared fiercely after him.

"Ougi? What's up?"

"That guy, Narita..."

"Oh." Kayama was in the same class. "Narita Yuzuru? He's the son of the dentist at the top of the hill. What about him?"

"Ah, nothing. What kinda guy is he?"

"What kind? Well..." Kayama thought for a moment. "Kinda odd. He's usually one of those serious, diligent sorta guys. He stays away from people like us and looks kinda uncomfortable when he has to talk to one of us. But somehow it's like he adapts really quickly, even to the people he never interacts with. I can't really make him out. He throws me in for a loop, that smile of his. It's like he doesn't know how to be cautious with anyone, and it makes you lower your guard, too..."

"Isn't he just a kid?"

"Well, maybe. But I'm a bit scared of him."

"Why?"

"Why am I afraid? It might be just my imagination, but..." Kayama crossed his arms and responded seriously, "He always looks like he's smiling, but sometimes his eyes change, just for a second. They look at you so intensely that it makes you shiver—I mean, well, his eyes are so clear and round that it's probably just the angle that makes them look like that. Oh, and I've heard that he's really sensitive to spirits and stuff," Kayama added, and Takaya stared at Yuzuru through the classroom door.

(Scary, huh...?)

He certainly couldn't deny that he also had the sense that Yuzuru was no ordinary kid.

(What a joker...) Takaya huffed. Just then—

"Ougi."

Takaya turned slightly at a familiar voice. Three bulky boys were walking towards him.

"Ah," Kayama gasped.

"We wanna talk to you."

"..."

Takaya returned their gazes indifferently. Speaking of the devil...

(Yokomori and Ichinose from third year...)

Takaya snorted a laugh and replied, "How 'bout we take it up to the roof then?"

Naturally, the talking led to fighting.

As Kayama had warned him, the topic of the conversation was Mitsui.

Roundabout as it was, he got the gist: they took exception to Ougi Takaya, who was not only younger than them but their underclassman in the same school, hanging around Mitsui, whom they practically worshipped, with such familiarity, in complete disregard of their prior claim. Yokomori and his lot appeared to have some asinine plan to take over the school, and were infuriated by those who ignored the seniority system.

He didn't bother listening until the end of the rant.

"You called me up here for this rubbish?" he interrupted, and Yokomori and the others immediately changed color.

"What?!"

"How is it any of your business who I hang out with? Humph. Older?

Younger? That's all bullshit. Ability's the thing that counts, so if you've got the time to waste quibbling with other people, why don'tcha try putting more effort into using that wasted lump you call a brain?"

"You punk, who the hell'd you think you are, lording it over us?!"

"Lording, am I...?" Takaya mocked. "Guess you can just call me Lord Ougi, then."

That was when the talking stopped. Though he conceded that the three-on-one odds were not in his favor, he wasn't about to roll over for anyone. He smashed Yokohama's nose in, and the fight pretty much became a no-holds-barred scuffle from there.

In the end, the three third-years knocked him out, and he missed afternoon classes. Not like he had actually been planning to go anyway, but having to admit that he couldn't move even if he wanted to was a lot more annoying. They'd finally seemed satisfied when Takaya had gone down and couldn't get up again, and had quickly disappeared down the stairs with a few self-aggrandizing taunts.

He'd been lying on the concrete since then—how long had it been, anyway?

Careful of his aching body, Takaya rolled onto his back and looked up at the brilliant blue winter sky. His lips were cut and swollen. The sharp pain from a touch made him moan involuntarily. He seemed to have a broken bone or two somewhere as well, but for the time being it was easier not to move.

(Assholes...)

Punks who didn't have the guts to go one on one, but thought they were all that because they fought in a group. He wondered angrily why he had to end up as the punching bag for losers like that.

And Kayama was no better. When the brawl had turned into a simple beating, he'd tried to step in, but had turned tail when he'd thought that he might be associated with Takaya. He didn't want Yokomori's attention on him.

(That's how it is.)

They wanted other people to do their dirty work, and pretended ignorance and stayed far away at the first sign of danger. At that moment Takaya was madder at Kayama than at Yokomori and company.

So. He couldn't hope for anything from anyone. He couldn't trust anyone. The best he could ask for was for enemies who openly declared themselves his enemies. More dangerous were those who pretended to be

his friends while actually waiting for an opportunity to stab him in the back.

(Like I'm gonna let myself be used by the likes of you.)

He glared into the sky, his entire body rigid as a blade. Trust no one... He had to regard kindness with suspicion... He would figure out their true intentions before he could be used by them. Those scheming bastards—

(I'll never give them the satisfaction of seeing me cry at their betrayal...)

He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth against a pain that went all the way to the bone, alone there on the cold concrete above the cheerful shouts of the students in the school below.

"O-Onii-chan ...!"

Ten days or so later, Miya shot out of the stairwell of their apartment building at the sight of her brother and came running over.

"Miya..."

"Onii-chan ,

where have you been? What've you been doing?!" Miya half-sobbed, clinging to Takaya. Takaya had left after entrusting Miya to their neighbor. Though he'd been back several times during the day while his father was away, he hadn't seen Miya, who'd been off at school.

"Miya. Is the old man home?"

"No. He's not back yet. ...But..." How forlorn she must have felt to be left all alone. Miya clung to Takaya and refused to let go.

"Tell Sakurai-san thank-you for me. They've taken a lot of trouble to look after you. I have to pay them for food..."

"Onii-chan , are you coming back?"

Takaya grimaced a little. "...Has the old man quieted down a bit yet?"

"Not...really... At night he drinks and then I think he gets bad again..."

"... I see."

He had probably already clean forgotten that he was Takaya and Miya's father. Sighing deeply, Takaya paid a visit to the Sakurais, the neighbors who had taken Miya in.

Mrs. Sakurai, shocked by the cuts on Takaya's face, immediately shooed him into the house and tended to them.

"Well, at night when Ougi-san has had too much to drink, he comes to the front door and starts yelling 'give my children back to me!'" she told Takaya as she cut some gauze. She frowned towards their apartment,

looking truly troubled. "But even so, if we returned Miya-chan now, we don't know what he'll do to her. That's why no matter how much noise he makes, we've refused to send her back. We thought that we'd wait him out until he got tired of it and settled down..."

Feeling the weight of the blame on his own shoulders, Takaya bit his lip. He couldn't stand the thought of putting his neighbors through so much trouble.

"I'm really...really sorry."

"This is not at all something you should be apologizing for. You and Miya-chan are the victims here..." Mrs. Sakurai said, peering at Takaya worriedly. "So how are you getting by, Takaya-kun? You haven't been home, right?"

"I..."

He was at a loss for an answer. Miya stared at him. She must be more worried about him than anyone.

"I'm staying at a friend's house," Takaya reluctantly lied. He didn't want to add to their worries.

"If you're concerned about being a burden, don't be. Miya-chan is lonely by herself, too. Wouldn't it be better for you to come stay with her...?"

"..."

He knew that Miya desperately wanted him to agree. But the Sakurai household had three children of its own. To take in Miya alone was enough of a burden on them, and he couldn't add himself to that list. —And...

In the end, she must consider them nuisances, Takaya thought, and braced himself. He couldn't look to his kin for help. He couldn't add to other people's troubles.

So he only begged earnestly, "Please...look after Miya a little longer."

But Mrs. Sakurai, concerned about the situation, suggested that he go see someone from the Family Court. One of its counselors had mediated their parents' divorce; perhaps he could be of help...

He couldn't afford to get his hopes up, Takaya thought. He truly believed that killing his father was the only way to resolve the situation. The trouble he was putting these people through only confirmed that conclusion in Takaya's mind.

(If I'd done it that night...)

But he hadn't, and could only regret that fact. The face of the one who had gotten in his way appeared in the back of his mind.

(Narita—...)

Mortification filled him every time he thought back on it. If he hadn't allowed himself to be shaken like that—

He couldn't just leave things as they were, he thought, clenching his fists. Once he had settled everything, he would use any means at his disposal to extract retribution.

First his father. Then...

"Onii-chan , are you leaving?"

Since his father was not at home, Takaya took the opportunity to change. A despondent Miya followed him out. Mrs. Sakurai had insisted

that he eat with them, but Takaya had left before she could suggest that he stay the night. If he remained too long he was afraid that he would give in to her kindness.

"I can't be a burden on Sakurai-san. Don't you act spoiled either."

"No! I'm going with you! I'm going with you to your friend's house!"

"Don't be silly."

"No! I want to be with you!"

"Miya!"

Miya clung to Takaya and rubbed her face fretfully against him, her braids swinging behind her. It'd been so long since he had seen her smile; he felt as if all he saw these days were her tears. More than anything, he didn't want his sister to be so desperately sad.

Takaya gently pulled away from Miya and crouched down to peer into her face.

"I'll definitely come back for you. ...Be patient. I'll definitely come back..."

"Onii-chan ..."

"You're a strong girl, right?" he said with a smile, gently patting Miya's red cheeks. Miya's face contorted again. Takaya did his best to cheer her up. "So don't cry anymore, okay?"

Takaya stood and turned to the dark night street as the cold north wind lifted his coat. That was when he noticed the silhouette standing

beneath a street light just ahead. He squinted. When he recognized the face, it startled him so much that for a moment he was speechless.

"*You...*"

Takaya bit off the muttered word. The one standing there was Narita Yuzuru.

"Narita. Why are you...?"

Yuzuru, perhaps on his way home after club activities, was still in school uniform. He seemed to have been waiting for Takaya. Before Yuzuru could say anything, Miya turned to him and asked, "[Onii-chan](#) , is that the friend you were talking about...?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah..." he quickly replied.

Miya had never met Yuzuru before. She stared at him, then stepped up to him and looked up again cautiously. After a moment, she bowed.

"Thank you for looking after my brother. I'm sorry for the trouble, but please continue to do so."

Yuzuru looked blankly at Miya for a second, but answered the very serious expression on her face with a gentle smile.

"... I will."

Miya, comforted by Yuzuru's ingenuous smile, finally responded in kind. Takaya, on the other hand, was startled. Here was the smile that had been missing from Miya's face for so long.

After Miya had gone back into the building, Takaya finally demanded, "What did you come here for?"

Yuzuru tensed at Takaya's tone. He searched for words for a moment, not really knowing how to talk to Takaya. He finally answered, "I was wondering...what happened afterwards..."

"..."

He must have looked up Takaya's address. Wariness filled Takaya again as he remembered that night.

"Why're you stalking me? What the hell are you planning? Are you Oonuki's stooge or something? What did he tell you? Did he send you to get me? Or are you looking for my weak points so you can rat me out to him?"

"No!" Yuzuru denied flatly, violently. Takaya continued to glare at him sullenly. Yuzuru's eyes were firm on his face, even steadier than before.

"Oonuki is a coward, and I don't like him."

"..."

Yuzuru's frankness startled him again. But he couldn't let down his guard. His unwavering glare seemed to shake Yuzuru slightly.

"Ah... That's why, I..."

Takaya faced Yuzuru with all the wariness and alertness of a wild animal raising its hackles at the sight of a stranger. Yuzuru flinched,

but screwed up his courage to ask, "Where are you planning to go?"

"What?"

"The truth is that you don't have anywhere to stay, right? You don't have a quiet place to spend the night?"

"..."

"Why don't you come to my house?"

He was surprised yet again. Those words had come from so far out in left field that for a moment Takaya couldn't even grasp their meaning. But Yuzuru had said them solemnly, without a hint of mockery. His voice strengthened even further.

"I've heard the rumors. That you can't go home, so you're just drifting. If you don't have anywhere to go, then come to my house. You can stay as long as you want, until things settle down. It's better if you don't have to keep wandering around, right? So come stay at my house. You can act like it's your own place. I haven't asked my parents yet, but I think it'll be okay if we explained. I'll persuade them, so..."

He couldn't understand why Yuzuru was saying all this. He... Takaya thought, eyes sharpening. (Does he pity me or something?)

He glared at Yuzuru with open hostility. —That's total bullshit.

"Fuck off."

"Ougi?"

"I'm not so down in the dumps that I need your pity. So you wanna meddle in other people's lives 'cause you're rich? What a lucky kid."

Yuzuru rocked back, shocked. Takaya's eyes glittered with rage. "Just looking at your face pisses me off. Get lost, or I'll really let loose."

There was fear on Yuzuru's face. Kayama must've been imagining things. Push enough, and he shut right up. Takaya snorted a laugh before walking away.

"Rich brats like you should keep to your own crowd. Don't act like you're better than me, kid," Takaya said into Yuzuru's ear as he slipped past and headed down the street. Yuzuru took two, three steps after him, but could follow no further at the violent rejection written so plainly on Takaya's back.

The cold wintry wind swirled through the space between them.

He couldn't fathom Yuzuru's real motives at all.

He'd been thinking about it since earlier, face filled with doubt.

Having no place else to go, he had returned to Mitsui's hangout. But as usual he was smoking alone outside, sitting on a box beneath the tiny naked light bulb behind the garage where the raw materials were stored.

(Why did he say stuff like that to me?)

To *me*?

If he'd been trying to meddle, then he really didn't know anything about the world. Would you normally say "come stay with me" to someone

from a completely different world? Did people like that really exist?

Takaya could only conclude that Yuzuru had been making fun of him. The honors student type was frequently insensitive, and clueless about how much they rubbed others the wrong way.

(What a stupid guy...)

He glared past the brim of the hat covering his eyes at nothing. At that moment, the garage's back door opened, and light from within streamed past Takaya's foot.

"So you came back after all—"

He looked up at the voice, and Mitsui stepped outside.

"—just like a stray dog."

He shut the door on the laughing voices inside.

"I ain't feeding you."

"..."

Takaya shot him an apathetic glare before pulling the hat back down over his eyes. Mitsui laughed at him. He produced a small polyethylene

bag and held it up in front of Takaya. The bag contained a white powder.

"What's that?"

"The stuff I mentioned the other day."

Mitsui put it back into his pocket and took out a thin syringe in a small case instead.

"This is one dose."

"Is that..."

"The good stuff. I got some from a dealer the other day. This one's on me, so you don't even need to pay me for it."

Takaya gazed at the syringe expressionlessly. He looked away without interest.

"Not in the mood right now."

"Humph. Lost your nerve?"

Takaya looked up, eyes flashing. Mitsui smiled thinly and placed the syringe in its case beside him.

"Who gave you that cut on your face?"

"None of your business."

"Yokomori and his lot, huh?" Mitsui had already figured it out. Takaya looked at him coldly, but Mitsui gave a low chuckle. "Those cowards are no better than frogs in a well. And you're you. They can't shut you up."

"I told you it's none of your fucking business."

Mitsui blinked and looked back at him. Takaya growling warningly, "Stop sticking your nose into everything, Mitsui. Those guys aren't worth retaliation from you. I'll crush them myself. I'm not gonna let you interfere."

He didn't want Mitsui to think he was asking for help. He couldn't bear having people think that he was hanging around Mitsui for his protection.

"So don't you do anything to them."

"... So you're giving me orders now? You're getting worse and worse, little boy."

Mitsui's sharp fox-eyes narrowed with unique ferocity as one corner of his lips curved up.

"...!"

Takaya involuntarily retreated before Mitsui's transformation. There was true viciousness in Mitsui's eyes, and he realized now how similar it was to a desire for blood. It intimidated him. Takaya was no match for this terrifying Mitsui, whose intensity was enough to freeze Takaya in his place.

"Why would I waste you on them? I've got guys who'll kill anybody with a single word from me. And not just here—in prison, too. So I'm the only one you should lower your head to. D'you know how many hundreds

a

single command from me could move?"

"You making fun of me? You can threaten me all you want for all the difference it makes to me!"

There was a quiver in Takaya's voice, despite his bravado. The corners of Mitsui's lips twisted into an ugly sneer at Takaya's fear.

"Oh, you're one audacious kid. Nobody's ever talked back to me like you. I totally get why Yokomori and his lot are pissed at you. You even manage to get my blood boiling sometimes, and I'm as laid-back as they come. —But you know, Ougi, to get by in this world, sometimes you have to know when enough is enough and show some respect to your elders. So

I should probably teach you some manners."

The viciousness in Mitsui's thin smile was quite ominous enough to terrify Takaya. He tensed unconsciously.

"So I suppose you'll tell me this'll be for my own good?"

"If you don't learn what I wanna teach you, then I'll just have to pound it into your body."

Takaya backed into the wall. Mitsui flipped off his cap with the back of his knife, then seized Takaya's hair in one hand and pinned Takaya's terrified eyes with a gimlet stare.

"Time to say 'uncle', Ougi."

"..."

"Tell me you'll never talk back to me again. Tell me you'll jump at my every command. You'll use an honorific with my name and bow your head to me."

Takaya was petrified by the cruelty in Mitsui's voice, by the knowledge that this was an opponent against whom he had no chance of winning. To refuse would probably be the same as signing his own death warrant. But even as he shook in terror, his eyes stubbornly resisted Mitsui's command. A resistance for which he put his life on the line.

Mitsui muttered to himself as his gaze bore into Takaya, "...You remind me of someone."

Then he bent and touched his lips to the nape of Takaya's neck. Takaya gasped and tried to twist away, but the grip in his hair kept him from moving. He gritted his teeth against the sensation of Mitsui's tongue licking a trail down his neck.

"..You...asshole..."

He thrust Mitsui back with all his might. Mitsui crashed into the pile of boxes behind him and fell to the ground. He glared back at Takaya, panting.

Takaya, his own breaths wild, snarled at Mitsui like a feral, cornered animal, a beast which would sink its teeth into the throat of any who dared take a single step towards him.

"...I'm gonna beat you to a pulp," Takaya growled softly, his eyes filled with killing rage. "I'm gonna kill you...!"

"Go ahead and try it, punk," Mitsui's usual savage smile appeared on his face. "And we'll see who gets killed."

Mitsui jeered at Takaya's wordless growl and swayed to his feet. Takaya froze for an instant. Mitsui took the syringe from the case on top of the wooden box and approached Takaya, driving him back.

"Wh...what are you doing..."

His back hit the wall. He could see the fiendish light in Mitsui's eyes.

"!"

He wanted to run, but he had nowhere to go. Mitsui grabbed his arms and pinned them back, throwing him face-down on the ground with a knee against his back. He struggled wildly, but Mitsui had the build and strength of an adult, and Takaya, still a junior high student, was completely overmatched.

"Let go of me...! Let me go...!"

One knee pressed hard against Takaya's lungs, and he gasped painfully for breath. He struggled violently as Mitsui tore his coat off his shoulders, then pulled up a sleeve to reveal his bare arm. The glint of the needle flashed across Takaya's eyes as they glared fiercely up at Mitsui. —Overwhelming terror assaulted him.

"Stop it...!"

"I'll pull you down," Mitsui whispered demonically, breathing raggedly.

"—I'll make you a good little boy, no matter how many times I have to do this. You alone..."

"...!"

"So shatter into pieces."

Mitsui held Takaya's flailing arms down with terrible strength as he brought the syringe closer. "No!" Takaya screamed over and over again, his voice barely recognizable as a voice. But no matter how hard he struggled, he was no match for Mitsui.

He had to get away! Now, right now, he had to...!

Trapped, choking with the painful pressure against his lungs, Takaya mustered the last of his strength to cry out, "Stop it! Mitsui!"

footnotes

[1] slang for delinquent

Frozen Wings Chapter 3: Headwind

He

awoke to the vague sense of someone calling his name, and finally opened his eyes as the cold stabbed into him. He found himself covered by a blanket with one of Mitsui's conies looking down at him. It was already fully light outside.

"...?"

"You've got a guest, Ougi. Says he came to see you."

(Me...?)

Still wrapped in the blanket, he managed to leverage his upper body upright through a cloud of fatigue. The morning sun, already well on its way overhead, streamed into the raw materials storage behind the garage. Who could it be? he wondered, rubbing his eyes, as his guest was lead over to him.

Takaya's eyes widened.

"Narita...!"

"So you *were* here." Yuzuru, dressed in ordinary clothes instead of his school uniform, heaved a sigh, his breath white in the morning air. It was already past nine; he should have been at school a long time ago.

"I heard from Kayama and his friends about this place. They said that I would probably find you here because they heard that you're with some person called Mitsui."

Dumbfounded and at a loss for a response, Takaya could only stare at Yuzuru in utter astonishment. Yuzuru walked up to him and pulled on his arm.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Let's go. You shouldn't be here."

"You gonna take me to school or something?"

"You don't have to go if you don't want to."

They passed Mitsui outside the gate. Mitsui turned to the two of them in surprise. Takaya's eyes met his for a second, but he had no chance to say anything as an insistent Yuzuru dragged him past.

"Hey, enough already!"

Takaya finally managed to shake him off at a public park a small distance away. Though startled, this time Yuzuru refused to back down. He glared unflinchingly at Takaya, who answered back in kind. He spat, "What the hell are you doing? Who the fuck d'you think you are?"

"You'll freeze to death sleeping there." Perhaps it was defiance that lent such strength to Yuzuru's tone. There was no longer any fear in his eyes. "Do you really want to die this young?"

"Narita... Dammit, why the hell d'you care? What are you angling for?"
Takaya demanded.

Takaya's question silenced Yuzuru for a moment. He stared directly at Takaya. Having those large, clear eyes focused so intently on him was admittedly a little disconcerting.

"Wh-what? Why're you looking at me like that?"

"You don't have to go to school if you don't want to, but you shouldn't be there. If you go back, I'll make you come with me to my house even if I have to drag you all the way."

By 'there', he meant Mitsui's garage. Takaya exploded at Yuzuru's officious-sounding tone.

"You can't 'make me' do anything."

Yuzuru's acorn eyes focused even more intensely against Takaya's fierce scowl.

"...Even if you're over there, you're still alone, aren't you?"

"..."

Takaya choked on his reply. What the hell was with this guy?! he wondered truly angry now.

"Shut the fuck up! I told you not to show your face to me again, didn't I? Or are you not going to be satisfied until I actually beat you up?"

In lieu of a response, Yuzuru glared straight back at him. Takaya

involuntarily drew back as that gaze pushed against him almost like a physical force. This was what Kayama had meant. He could think of nothing to fling at Yuzuru's silence.

Takaya abruptly spun and began walking away. Yuzuru followed right on his heels. He whirled and growled, "Stop following me, or I'll really punch you in the face!"

"..."

"I'll knock your teeth out, dammit."

But Yuzuru only glared wordlessly back at him. Actually, since Yuzuru's father was a dentist, that probably wasn't much of a threat. More furious by the moment, Takaya began moving again, determined to shake Yuzuru off.

They were walking down the path along [Matsumoto Castle](#)'s moat when Takaya finally turned.

"So you really wanna get pummeled?"

"Are you—" Yuzuru asked, still glaring at him, "—hungry?"

"?"

Takaya was instantly ravenous. Now that he thought about it, he'd had nothing since that early dinner at the Sakurais' yesterday. "Humph," Takaya scoffed, turning away. "Go eat if you wanna eat. Why don't you just get back to school already?"



"Ramen—" Yuzuru suggested, glaring at him even more ferociously, "want some?"

"..."

Nonplussed again, Takaya retreated from Yuzuru's extraordinary, dauntless stubbornness, a palpable force.

(Wh...what the hell is with this guy...?!)

Luckily, Takaya didn't realize that the intensity which had so shaken him was actually tension from simple, teeth-chattering fear.

Yuzuru put on his fiercest scowl yet. "My treat," he managed.

Takaya found himself being led by Yuzuru into a ramen restaurant on the street in front of the station without a clue as to how it had happened. Oddly, the place served [soba](#) even though it called itself a

ramen restaurant, and Yuzuru had him

pick the Japanese soba in ramen broth written on one of the boards along the walls listing the menu choices.

The two of them sitting there across from each other, slurping at the soba and not talking, presented a rather frightful sight to onlookers, but neither noticed. Takaya's wariness towards Yuzuru prickled madly.

(What the hell is he thinking?)

He couldn't read Yuzuru at all, and it made him edgy. When he had finished eating, Yuzuru put his hands together and gave thanks for the meal.

"What?"

Yuzuru's acorn eyes grew even rounder when he saw Takaya's eyes on him.

The gap between Yuzuru's expressions and actions confused Takaya still more.

"What..." Takaya galvanized himself and put his chopsticks down, "... the hell are you planning?"

"Planning? Well, the soba was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"That's not what I meant!" Takaya shouted, thrusting himself forward.

"Who the hell was asking about how the soba tasted? I'm talking about *you*! Why do I have to eat with you like we're friends or something?"

Yuzuru fixed another of his glares at Takaya from beneath his lashes.

Takaya twitched.

"My bird...the one who died..."

"???"

"I found her a few years ago by the side of the road. She fell because she was injured."

"..."

"If I'd left her, she'd probably have gotten eaten by a cat or something. There're a lot of alley cats around here. I didn't know who her owner was, so though I wasn't supposed to keep her, I made her my pet anyway."

Takaya blinked at him uncomprehendingly. Yuzuru looked confused, as if even he didn't know what he was trying to say.

Takaya, apparently finally finding an opening, snorted, "Hah. So in your injured bird's place you're gonna save me, is that it? Well, thanks so much. Now fuck off."

"That's not it!" Yuzuru flared. "It's just. You're doing all these crazy things, and I'm worried. Since that night, somehow..."

"!"

Clunk. Takaya kicked back the chair and stood. Yuzuru shivered at Takaya's glare.

Takaya snarled menacingly, "If you ever talk about that again, I'll kill you."

"...!"

Yuzuru's eyes lifted abruptly, and he stood. "Stop talking like that!"

Takaya rocked back. Yuzuru refused to back down. "All this stuff about killing and dying, stop saying things like that! Do you think you become stronger by saying it? You're totally wrong! It just makes you a coward!"

"What did you say?!" The blood rushed to his head. *Fuck this.* Takaya growled, "I can't take this anymore. Get out the back, Narita. I'm gonna beat you up right here."

"This place only has one entrance, so it's not like I can. You're all bark and no bite...!"

Takaya seized Yuzuru's collar in one violent movement. Yuzuru looked straight back at Takaya even as he trembled with fear. Tears pooled in his eyes.

"..."

He couldn't raise a fist.

He thrust Yuzuru away from him and left the restaurant. Yuzuru quickly left money for their meal and chased after him.

"Ougi, wait. Ougi!"

"..."

"Don't go, Ougi!"

He caught at Takaya's arm. The expression on Takaya's face as he turned was one Yuzuru had never seen there before, and he gasped. He thought for a moment that Takaya was actually crying, but his eyes were dry.

"What are you?" Takaya shouted, voice shaking. "Just what the hell are you?!"

He wrenched violently away from Yuzuru's grip and walked off without looking back. Yuzuru stood where Takaya had left him, dumbfounded.

"Ougi..."

Takaya ignored him. He disappeared into the foot traffic, hands thrust into his pockets. There was such loneliness in his back that Yuzuru could almost hear it cry out. He couldn't just let Takaya go like this.

"Ougi!"

Yuzuru refused to let Takaya out of his sight thereafter. Takaya, drifting aimlessly, seemed aware of his presence, but didn't speak to him. He wandered into the game center then out again, followed by several other haunts. Finally at around three in the afternoon, having no other place to go, he went home with Yuzuru still trotting in his footsteps.

Takaya saw a familiar figure at the entrance to the stairwell of his apartment building. The slim, broad-shouldered man was middle-aged

and

wore glasses. He nodded at Takaya in greeting.

"Kasai-san..."

This man was the Family Court counselor who had mediated his parents' divorce. He seemed to have been waiting for Takaya, and approached with

his usual mild expression. "Hey, it's been a while. How have you been?"

"Ah, yeah. Er, but why are you..."

Kasai smiled. "I guess your father isn't home yet? Well, that's probably a good thing, since I came to see you. I went to your school as well, but they told me you weren't there..."

"Have you been waiting here all this time?"

"Yes," he replied, and then noticing Yuzuru behind him, asked, "Is this your friend?"

"Wh...? Er, yeah..."

"Ah." Kasai greeted Yuzuru courteously. Takaya invited Kasai into the house, but he gently declined.

"Not today. I only came to see how you and your sister are doing."

"What?"

"Your father appears to have gotten violent again lately, hasn't he?"

Takaya fell silent at the question. Kasai studied him for a moment, then

invited both of them to the park nearby.

Kasai sat down on a bench and quietly took some caramels from his pocket, handing them one each. He was a rather mysterious person who always kept caramels in his pocket, perhaps because he himself really liked them. Miya had given him the nickname "Caramel Man." Takaya thought it rather childish, but it didn't seem to bother Kasai. He popped a caramel into his mouth before speaking.

"Actually, I heard about your father from Sakurai-san..."

Takaya looked down, a dark expression on his face. Kasai explained sympathetically, "I saw the same violence in your father a year and a half ago, while I was mediating your parents' divorce, and I was not really prepared for it. It was very hard on your mother. We knew that she was at the end of her rope from worry. But at that time your father made a firm promise, and based on all the factors, I shared the Court's judgment that you and your sister should be left with your father. But I was actually very concerned about what would happen after the ruling. The question was whether or not your father would be able to mend his ways."

"..."

"At that time, your father responded to our counseling and promised to do his best for the two of you. He was crying as he made that promise. I believe he was speaking from the heart. I believed those words, but..." Kasai sighed slightly, looking up at the sasanqua tree beside

him. "It's become difficult, hasn't it."

"..."

Takaya spoke, gaze fixed on his feet. "He couldn't keep it, in the end."

Kasai and Yuzuru both looked at Takaya.

"He's always been self-centered. He made Mom cry tons of times. He's a coward who starts bawling when he falls down because he can't get up again by himself. And he calls himself an adult."

Kasai looked somberly at Takaya's profile. Takaya sighed and closed his eyes.

"I can't see anything but his faults. He's so stupid that he just keeps digging himself into a hole. He's a good-for-nothing bum, and that's why he calls people names and puts them down. But—" Takaya's brows drew

together. "I guess I can't escape his blood after all. I was born with his worthless blood running through me..."

His fists were clenched so tightly in his lap that they had gone completely white.

"I wonder sometimes if this blood will turn me into an asshole like him, and I get so scared that it keeps me up at night... Maybe no matter how much I struggle, I'll still turn into someone as unfeeling as him... That's when I started to hate this blood that flows in me...and I think I might as well just kill myself before I become

him..."

Those last few words were spoken so softly that they were barely audible.

He came back to himself after a moment, wondering at himself and this odd, baseless garrulity. Somehow it always seemed to happen like this with Kasai. Was there some sort of truth serum in the caramels he gave out? Sometimes Takaya really suspected it.

But he had truly wanted to tell someone his real feelings. And he had spoken despite the chagrin he felt at opening his heart to someone for whom he knew he was only a job, one among many such cases.

No, it really didn't matter who he talked to. The truth was that he had simply had...no one, until now.

Yet Kasai understood his resentment. After a moment of silence, he said gently, "Takaya-kun. You are not bound by your father's 'blood'."

"...?"

Takaya looked up.

"People are... Well, it's quite true that we could not live without the 'blood' given to us by our parents, but how many existences does it actually encompass? Have you thought about that?"

"What...?"

"Your father and mother, their fathers and mothers, and each of their parents... if we follow the line back...you understand, yes? People

whose names you don't know, people going back a long, long way have made the 'blood' that flows in you. How many people came together to create your 'blood'? Do you know?"

"... Kasai-san..."

Kasai gave him another of those gentle smiles.

"Your blood actually encompasses many, many lives, a great sum of them. Which you choose from among them is your own free choice. Isn't that what people call 'potential'? You might say that in that case, nothing new would ever be created, but I think that the old gives birth to the new."

"..."

"You've only take a single portion from the Pandora's chest of potential bequeathed by your father's 'blood' and name. So if you don't want to become like him, then why not choose the things in your 'blood' that are not his?" Kasai suggested, and chuckled. "Otherwise you'd have to be carrying a double portion of your father's potential, wouldn't you?"

"Double?" Takaya questioned, and Kasai smiled.

"There's the portion from your mother as well."

Takaya stared at Kasai. The same gentle smile was in Kasai's eyes behind his glasses.

"I don't think you need to fear your 'blood'. On the other hand, you must not use being your father's son as an excuse."

Takaya felt as if he'd just been stabbed in the back. "I'd never do that!"—he caught himself on the verge of yelling out those words as he realized that in the back of his mind, he'd been using the excuse "because I'm that bum's son" to stray further and further from the right path. Kasai seemed to know it, but said nothing.

"You'll be...okay, yes?" he asked, almost in admonishment, before turning to Yuzuru next to him. "If he gets lost, you'll help him find his way, won't you?"

Yuzuru looked at Kasai with surprise, then at Takaya.

"Ougi..."

Takaya averted his face. Kasai slowly stood and slipped his hands into his trouser pockets, looking up at the sky.

"If you should see Mitsui-kun, will you tell him for me that Kasai is worried about the path he's on?"

"You...know Mitsui?"

Kasai turned to him.

"I have been put in charge of him several times. He has done some things which have led to him being placed in protective custody..."

"..."

"He, too, is a difficult young man. No matter how many times someone falls, I believe that we should help them back onto the right path, but... To hope *this time*, and then to have that hope betrayed each and every time...is truly painful," he murmured, before giving Takaya and Yuzuru that gentle smile again.

"In any case, I'm glad I was able to catch up with you today. I'll take my leave now, but I will call your house tonight. Your father should be home by then. I will speak to him," he promised, and raised his coat collar. "Please do not hesitate to tell me about anything that may trouble you. I will give you whatever help I can."

"—Kasai-san..."

"Please go home for today, all right?"

Then with a last warm, gentle smile, Kasai walked off.

Takaya's face fell as he looked after the retreating figure.

"Ougi..." Yuzuru said, but Takaya stood scowling steadily at his feet, lost in thought. Yuzuru fell silent and stood quietly beside Takaya as he brooded with a frighteningly serious expression on his face.

"Narita? Is that really Narita?"

Yuzuru's head jerked up at the sound of his name. A tall blond boy in school uniform was walking towards them.

"Oh...Kayama..." Yuzuru muttered, and Takaya looked up as well. Kayama, who hadn't noticed Takaya standing there until that moment, was so flabbergasted at finding the two of them together that he couldn't think of anything to say. Though...now he recalled that Yuzuru had been absent from school today.

"What are the two of you doing here?"

"Oh...we...just stumbled into each other. Is school out?" Yuzuru temporized, and Kayama frowned doubtfully.

"Yeah," he answered. "But that's some strange company you guys keep. I had no idea you even talked to each other."

Takaya, who had not forgotten Kayama's role in the incident from several days ago, fixed him with a glare as if to say he wanted Kayama to leave *right now*.

But Kayama was oblivious to the chill in that gaze. "Speaking of which—" he suddenly directed at Takaya, "—hey Ougi, something really freaky happened today."

"What?"

"Mitsui's underlings came into the school. They called Yokomori and his lot out and beat them up pretty bad."

"!" Takaya's face changed color. "What...did you say?"

"It was damn scary. They were carrying wooden swords, and it was so sudden, y'know? Oonuki and all the other clowns just stood there like

statues. Yokomori and the other two got totally pummeled. The police came and then the ambulance came, and the whole place was just chaos |

think one of 'em was put in the hospital. And I was just like, 'Daaamn,' y'know?"

Yuzuru abruptly looked at Takaya.

Takaya's face was ashen, and he trembled all over.

"Ougi, what..."

(He...!) Takaya shot to his feet, unable to restrain himself any longer. (Mitsui!)

The group of young roughs in the garage spun around as the door suddenly slammed open. Ougi Takaya stood at the entrance, panting for breath.

"Mitsui... Is Mitsui here?"

A familiar voice broke through the muttering: "Over here."

Takaya's eyes glittered as Mitsui appeared, clad in a leather jacket.

He growled, staring straight at Mitsui, "...You had your gang beat up Yokomori and the others, didn't you?"

Mitsui only looked back at him coldly. Takaya demanded in a snarl, "I told

you not to do anything, didn't I?"

"Don't get the wrong idea." Mitsui sat down. "This wasn't revenge for you."

"Then what was it?"

Mitsui's eyes flashed in a deceptively calm face. Takaya unthinkingly jerked back.

"I wanted them to know that under me, there are consequences for stepping out of line. They were warned to that effect, and about you as well. No one's gonna put a finger to you without an order from me."

"...!"

"They were punished for breaking the rules. Didja really think that I'm soft enough to take revenge for you?"

Takaya stood staring at him speechlessly. The other young men filed out of the garage at a gesture from Mitsui, leaving the two of them alone within. Mitsui waited until the door closed before asking Takaya, "Speaking of which, I've been wanting to ask you. How was the stuff last night?"

Takaya stiffened at the memory. His shoulders quivered.

Mitsui examined Takaya with intense interest, licking his lips.

"...Must have felt pretty good, huh? The thinner can't even compare, I bet?"

"You..."

"Want another? I can get it for you. However much you want, 'til you're so far in you'll never get out again."

Mitsui's amused gaze was trained on Takaya's face. He truly found pleasure, this man, in watching others stumble and fall deeper and deeper into darkness. Enjoyed it as if he were some kind of demon, Takaya thought in resentment.

"...!"

The resentment transformed into a prickling sense of danger in the moment he finally understood Mitsui's true intentions.

Once he found a target, he left them with no escape. He taught them to be criminals, drowned them in vice, reeled them in so tightly that they were left to dangle on his hook with no way out. He truly *was* a demon from Hell. That was what lay beneath the human skin.

Takaya felt as if he had recognized that which made Mitsui truly terrifying for the first time. Mitsui was the one who had coached him in all of it: inhaling thinner, stealing, blackmail... Mitsui wanted to entrap him, to pull him down deeper and deeper until he could go no further— *That* was why Mitsui had taken him in.

If he stayed around this man much longer, he would probably never be able to turn back...

As Takaya abruptly turned around to leave, Mitsui's voice snapped out at him: "I'm not letting you get away, Ougi."

"...!"

"You're already a badger in a hole, same as us. Same hole, same boat. You've touched the drugs. If I go down, you're going down with me."

Takaya turned, hatred in his eyes. Mitsui gave him a thin, sly smile.

"You have nowhere to run."

It was already completely dark outside.

Warm lights glowed from the windows of the apartment complex. How many hours had he been sitting here on these stairs? Looking down at him, Kayama asked, "How long are you planning to wait for him?"

Yuzuru blew on his cupped hands, his breath white in the chill wind out of the north. The temperature had fallen drastically after sundown. He wasn't wearing gloves, and both his hands and cheeks were chafed red.

"I don't think Ougi's coming back tonight."

"..."

Yuzuru wasn't listening. His gaze was focused on the dark road as he tried to warm his hands. Kayama sighed in defeat.

"You're really weird, you know that? Why're you waiting for him, anyway? It's not like you're friends or anything."

Yuzuru made no reply. Kayama had been waiting with Yuzuru all this

time, but even he himself didn't know why. Or maybe he had only been struck by the same baffling, anxious concern for Takaya.

"Narita. What the heck are you thinking?"

Yuzuru, silent until now, finally spoke. "Go home if you wanna go home."

"Wh..."

"I'll wait here. But can you really just go home and leave someone when he's like this? Leave someone as close to the edge as he is?"

Kayama had no idea what Yuzuru was talking about. Maybe he was depressed? He peered at Yuzuru's face, but Yuzuru looked back at him with such frightening solemnity that he unconsciously drew back. Kayama had never seen Yuzuru like this before.

"Can't you hear his voice?"

"... Narita..."

Yuzuru glowered into the darkness.

(Why am I waiting here for someone like him?)

Yuzuru hugged himself tightly against the cold. He had never met anyone so cuttngly ferocious, so brittle and fragile. He held to his tough act so tightly that he denied that it was all a bluff even to himself. Did no one notice how his heart cried out? Yuzuru could only rage at the people around him.

Even if anyone should hold their hand out to him, he would never be able to simply take it in blithe na?vet?. His heart had been betrayed and wounded too many times, and had closed itself off in fear of the possibility that it could happen again. He had trained himself to suspect, to turn away from even the true hand of friendship. Why did no one hear the lonely wailing of his heart? Why had no one reached out to pull him up?

He had no idea if he could do anything for Takaya. But even so, he wanted to wait—alone, if need be. Wait for Takaya to return, in order to say a few simple words to him: "I can hear your voice."

For that, he didn't care how long he had to wait.

Until the night dawned, until the morning came—.

(Why am I doing this for someone like that...?)

This is so stupid, Yuzuru thought as he wrapped his arms around his upraised knees and buried his face against them. He'd be better off ignoring a hoodlum like that. They lived in different worlds. He knew this.

(But...)

The cold wintry wind swirled around him.

Yuzuru bit his lip, hugging his chilled body.

Frozen Wings Chapter 4: No Exit

Takaya never returned that night.

But he did, for some reason, show up at school the next day near noon.

Oonuki, who had evidently been waiting for him, promptly summoned him to the teachers' room.

"...You've heard about what happened to Yokomori and his friends?"

Takaya, standing with his hands in his pockets by habit, avoided meeting Oonuki's eyes. Oonuki licked his lips in anticipation; Takaya had the distinct impression that he was more motivated by glee at this opportunity to talk down to him than concern for Yokomori and company.

"You goaded Mitsui into it, didn't you?"

"..."

"So you can't even get your own revenge without someone else's help? No that I expected anything else from a coward like you."

Takaya shot Oonuki a sharp glare. "Fuck you. I didn't say anything."

Oonuki smirked and leaned forward as if he had been waiting for this reaction from Takaya.

"Drop the excuses. Mitsui wouldn't have come here without you egging him on. Aside from you, all the students of this school are well-behaved angels."

"What...!"

"I guess this is what they mean by bad blood, hmm? Your father is a drunkard, isn't he? And your mother ran off with another man?"

"!"

Takaya seized Oonuki's collar in a sudden, violent movement. Oonuki's face stiffened with fear. The other teachers turned in surprise. Takaya was already on edge and *not* in a mood to be insulted today. Too late for that.

"Shut your blathering piehole, you asshole! You think I'm gonna sit still and listen to your rubbish? Keep going and I'll punch your face in right here, dammit!"

"O-Ougi! Stop!"

"Come on, keep going, dammit! Do I look like I've got the time to listen to a chicken-livered coward prattle at me, you disgusting tanuki pervert?!"

"Ougi! Stop, Ougi!"

Oonuki was so terrified that he couldn't get out a single word. Takaya continued to jeer at him, his hand shaking on Oonuki's collar, as the other staff shoved each other out of the way to separate them. The room descended into chaos.

Fear tinged all the gazes that fell on him. When he walked down the corridor, students cleared a path for him even as they whispered about him behind his back, probably about what had happened to Yokomori. Because of that incident his connection to Mitsui had been called to unnecessary attention and exaggerated out of all proportion.

Though Yokomori no longer dared raise a hand against him, his hatred was now absolute. For all that none of it had been instigated by Takaya, there wasn't much he could do at this late date.

(Damn that bastard Mitsui...) Takaya cursed savagely to himself, then looked up as—

"You didn't go home last night, Ougi?"

He turned at the abrupt voice to see an unusually worked-up Kayama. Though Takaya's return gaze held not only its habitual hostility but an edge of constrained violence, today Kayama faced it unflinchingly.

"Narita didn't come to school today."

"?"

"He waited for you until midnight last night in front of your house, in that freezing cold, and came down with a fever. I was there too. I rushed him back to his house. He's resting at home today."

"Wh...at..."

The words made absolutely no sense to him for a moment. They were, in

fact, too outrageous to believe. Yuzuru had waited for him? Waited for him, until...? What the hell was going on?

"When that guy's convinced about something, he goes after it with a one-track mind. I couldn't stop him," Kayama told him, grimacing.

"That's what I came here to tell you. I've got no clue why Narita's so hung up about you, but I guess there're lots of idiots in the world. I don't care what you do, but don't wrap other people up in it." Kayama walked away, leaving Takaya frozen in place, stunned.

School was boring anyway, Takaya thought as he left. He wandered through the city, but before he knew it his feet were climbing the hill road he had taken that night. He stopped before the house that he remembered—Narita Yuzuru's house.

"..."

He looked up at the house from the spot in front of the garden. He didn't know which window belonged to Yuzuru, but it was probably one of those on the second-floor with a blind drawn across. He stood there motionlessly for a while, but—

(What the hell am I doing?) he wondered, tossing the cigarette he'd been smoking into the garden. He was getting angry just standing there. It was almost like he was *worried* about Yuzuru, who had gotten a fever waiting for him to come home.

(I can't believe I came here...)

His eyes abruptly fell to the little mound at the front of the garden.

There was a piece of wood sticking out of it—this must be the aforementioned bird's grave. He brooded over it for a moment before turning to leave again.

"Ougi! It *is* Ougi, right?"

One of the blinded second-floor window clicked open, and Narita Yuzuru's face poked out.

"Narita—...!"

"Wait! I'm coming down!" Yuzuru called, and disappeared. After a few seconds the front door opened, and Yuzuru came rushing out in a sweater, red-faced.

"Oh, good! Since you're wearing your school uniform it means you went to school, right? And went home, too."

"Don't you have a fever...?" He didn't add, "Should you be running out like this?"

But Yuzuru seemed to have heard him anyway, and shook his head. "It's nothing." Then he truly smiled at Takaya for the first time. It staggered Takaya, who had never seen a smile so bright and innocent before. This must Yuzuru's usual expression. He seemed genuinely, whole-heartedly happy that Takaya had come to see him.

"Since you're here, why don't you come in? We have red tea and stuff. It's cold today, isn't it?"

"You..."

"I was getting bored, too. Have you had lunch? I'm sorry I can't go have ramen with you today."

Those words moved Takaya.

How could Yuzuru be saying them to him? So naturally, so simply and sincerely that his chest tightened...?

Sudden tears blurred his vision, and Takaya immediately cursed himself. *What the hell are you doing, you idiot?* He hurriedly took a cigarette and lighter out of his pocket, but

couldn't get the cigarette to light. Yuzuru looked up at him—he was going to see the tears. Was the lighter out of fuel? He couldn't get a flame out of it. He crushed the cigarette and threw it savagely to the ground.

"Ougi!" Yuzuru called, startled, at Takaya's back as he abruptly turned.

With his back to Yuzuru, Takaya muttered, "...Learn your lesson yet? Leave me alone, dammit."

"Ougi..."

"Don't wait for me again, you blockhead!"

He quickly walked off, burying his face in his scarf as he desperately tried to hold back the overflowing tears. If this went on, he would

become weak; he would start to yearn for kindness, even the fake kind.

To wish for warmth...

Yuzuru stood frozen, staring at Takaya's back. He knew that Takaya had been crying, had seen the wrenching loneliness of that small figure disappearing into the cold wind.

I can hear your voice, your weeping. I can hear it so clearly...

Yet you still refuse to let anyone reach out to you, even knowing how refusal would hurt you...

So the days passed. The first snow fell, then covered the mountains; December went by in a blink, and suddenly Christmas music was playing everywhere...

The heater's low rumble filled the warm, quiet room. Takaya was sitting on the carpet, gazing at the clouded window. Next to him, Miya had begun decorating the Christmas tree, which she had spent the entire day yesterday digging out of the closet where it had lain lost and forgotten after their move.

"Onii-chan , can you hand me that star? And that fuzzy thing?"

"This?"

The 'fuzzy thing' was apparently a garland that went around the tree.

He passed them over to Miya, who looked them over carefully while deciding where to place them.

"Isn't it wonderful that we can all spend this Christmas together at home? We have to go get a cake later."

"...Yeah."

Kasai from the family court had talked to their father, who'd finally quieted down enough for Miya and Takaya to return home. Though he'd gone off several times, the eruptions hadn't been as bad as before. He'd gotten a new job, and seemed to be working at it diligently.

Though how long he'd be able to keep at it was another question...

Takaya had not been to Mitsui's place for several days. He'd heard that Ichinose, one of Yokomori's buddies, had finally been released from the hospital about a week ago. He hadn't seen them at all, but...

The phone rang. Since Miya had her hands full, Takaya stood and answered.

"Hello? This is Ougi."

"Ah, Ougi? It's me, Kayama!"

"Kayama?" he asked suspiciously, puzzled at the odd caller.

Kayama shouted into the receiver urgently, "Have you heard about Mitsui?"

"Mitsui? What's up with him?"

"He got taken in by the police! The day before yesterday or something.

They were watching that place they always go to, and they took him away in a police car!"

"What?!"

Right at that moment, the doorbell chimed. He looked at Miya—*I can't get it right now*—who sighed and got up to answer.

"And then what happened? The police... So what the heck did Mitsui do...?"

"I don't know the details, but I've heard people say something about drugs..."

"**Onii-chan** !" Miya suddenly screamed from the door. Startled, Takaya dropped the receiver and dashed to the door.

A group of middle-aged men wearing coats were standing outside the door

"Ougi Takaya-kun, yes?"

"Wh...!"

What they were holding up to him were, unmistakably, police notebooks.

"We're from the police. Are you aware of the fact that your friend Mitsui-kun was arrested on suspicion of illegal possession and distribution of narcotics?"

"...!"

"You are under suspicion of the same. We would like you to come down with us to the police station."

"Distribution...? Wait a minute!"

The men ignored Takaya and began forcefully leading him away.

"No! I don't know anything about distribution! I didn't do it, dammit!"

"We'll listen to anything you have to say at the station. Come along."

"Let go of me!"

Miya clung to Takaya as he struggled with the men. One of them caught her and held her back in the room.

"Onii-chan , Onii-chan !"

"Miya! I didn't! I didn't do it... So I'll be back soon, okay?"

"Onii-chan !"

The uproar roused several of their neighbors. Held tightly between two plain-clothed police officers, Takaya was shoved into the car at the bottom of the stairs. He slid onto the cold seat as the other officers climbed in and shut the door. The adults were silent. To them he was probably nothing more than a suspect, a *thing*.

There was no room for Takaya to move in the car's cold interior. The blank, impassive expressions surrounding him intimidated him.

(I'm scared...)

This was the first time he had felt such fear. It consumed him, and he couldn't stop shaking. This was a cold, dark coercive power on a completely different level from Mitsui and the school teachers. He was being taken away by the police...being laid siege to by a massive power which his small existence had no way of contesting.

He didn't know what to do...

His mind went blank as he shrank with terror like a little bird hunted by a gigantic predator.

"Suspicion of possession and distribution of narcotics—..."

Takaya swallowed.

(Mitsui...)

Yuzuru called Takaya's place as soon as he heard of Mitsui's arrest from Kayama, but by that time Takaya was already gone. A sobbing Miya told him that Takaya had been taken away by the police. Unable to sit still, Yuzuru agreed to meet Kayama at Takaya's apartment and flew out of the house. Kayama had already arrived by the time he got there about an hour later. There was still a crowd of people gathered, gossiping about what had happened in hushed voices. Yuzuru paid them no heed.

"Narita!"

"You said something about Ougi being taken away because of drugs? What the heck is going on?" Yuzuru shouted roughly.

Miya was weeping beneath the tree nearby. Yuzuru crouched and shook her

shoulders. "Miya-chan, how did your brother look? What did he say when he was being taken away?"

"That he didn't do anything. That he'll be back soon..."

Miya began crying even harder. Yuzuru and Kayama looked at each other.

"Kayama. How did you know about Mitsui?"

"Everyone knows about it. Mitsui held everybody's strings 'round these parts. Stuff like that, it just went from mouth to mouth."

"Is it true about Ougi and the drugs?"

"Dunno. He hung around Mitsui's place a lot."

Unable to contain himself, Yuzuru ran to the door. Kayama shouted at him, "Where're you going?!"

"I'm going to ask this Mitsui's friends. If it's true about the drugs...!"

"You idiot, that's not... Hey, Narita!"

Yuzuru had already shot like a bullet out the door.

"I told you, I don't got any! How many times do I have to tell you I don't sell drugs?" Takaya desperately refuted the charges in the inadequately-heated interrogation room. There were two detectives cross-examining him, and a third taking notes who stared at Takaya with irritation.

"That's what all others said at the beginning, too," said the middle-aged detective with the wily eyes and sprinkle of white in his hair. "You should stop being so stubborn and just tell us the truth."

"I don't you the truth: I didn't do it!"

You just don't know when to give in, do you? his expression said. He had already decided on Takaya's guilt before he'd even asked the first question

"You've caused some problems at your school, I see. A fight or two, was it? And you've been skipping school and not going home, staying out late at night and hanging around the miscreants in the area? Think you're pretty high up there, don't you, telling Mitsui's underlings to beat up ordinary students at your school?"

Takaya took in a breath. "Wh-who told you..."

"The teachers at your school are pretty weak too, I guess. I feel sorry for them, having to deal with a student like you."

He started. They must have asked his teachers about him, and they wouldn't have held back about Ougi Takaya with the police.

"Your parents are divorced, correct? Speaking of which, I believe your father has brushed with the law several times for drinking and violence? Well, there you have it then. I guess there's no use fighting your blood, is there?"

"..."

"When did you meet Mitsui and his gang? You hung around them, didn't you? You've been on the sidelines, but you've been doing some bad things, haven't you? Hmn... Or is this your first crime? Know how to swim with the tide, do you? You're one scary kid."

"I told you, I...!"

"Don't lie to me!"

Takaya flinched back from the deep angry voice.

"There are four people selling LSD to junior high students in the city, including Mitsui. We've already caught the other two, and you're the last, aren't you! Mitsui has connections to the Nagano drug dealers—we have proof of that! We also have testimony from those who've bought drugs from you! So that's *enough* lying to your elders!"

"!"

A total bolt out of the blue. Testimony? What did that mean? Someone had bought drugs from him? Why would anyone have said that?

"What...did Mitsui say...?" The arrogant detective made no response.

Takaya unthinkingly stood and walked up to him. "I'm asking you what Mitsui said!"

"I can't tell you that."

"Fuck you, you asshole! How the hell would I be a drug dealer? Someone told you that *I'm* selling LSD?! Who the hell was it? Bring the guy who told you that out here right now!"

"Quiet down, you!"

The other detective dragged Takaya away from the detective whose collar he had seized. As Takaya continued to yell and struggle wildly, the third officer who had been taking notes hurried over as well. His arm was twisted behind his back and his face pushed down against the desk.

"Fuck you! I didn't do it!"

"That's enough! Calm down!"

"You...assholes!"

Even with his head shoved against the desk he continued to glare at the middle-aged detective. The detective looked back at him scornfully. He had never really intended to listen to anything Takaya said. No—he was determined to ignore the truth and force Takaya to take the blame!

"Uwaaaaaah—!"

The detectives untangled themselves from him at his scream. The last detective suddenly punched him in the face.

"Stop resisting and confess right now! Otherwise we'll send you to juvenile detention!"

A foot slammed into him as he crumbled to the floor.

"Little shit like you, you don't learn your lesson until you find out first-hand what prison's like!"

Takaya had no way of defending himself. He cowered against the blows as the ruthless detectives rained unbelievably foulmouthed jeers on him.

His head was spinning. He pressed his hands against his ears.

(Mitsui...!)

Was it you, Mitsui?!

Mitsui's words echoed in his mind.

"You're already a badger in a hole, same as us."

The adults continued to rain abuse on him.

"If I go down, you're going down with me."

"You want it to stop? Then confess! Confess and we'll stop! Punk like you, you'll be in here soon anyway. It's all the same, so why not just admit your guilt?"



Takaya bore it all, silently yelling, *Mitsui...! Was it you, Mitsui?!*

"Same hole, same boat."

Unable to contain himself any longer, he spat out, the words scorching as blood in his mouth: "You asshole, Mitsuiiiii!"

(There must be a misunderstanding...!)

Yuzuru was convinced of that.

There must be some mistake! he shouted again and again in his mind as he sprinted towards Mitsui's garage. No matter how much Takaya had strayed, he was not the type of person to sell drugs.

He suddenly noticed several familiar-looking young roughs walking towards him. It was the third year, Yokomori, and his friends. Yuzuru was about to ignore them and walk right past when—

"Serves him right, that Ougi punk."

Yuzuru stopped when he heard Takaya's name.

"The police came and took him away, so he won't be going home anytime soon. Got what he deserved, that little bastard. Maybe they'll throw him straight into juvenile detention."

"He'll probably never get out again, yah hah hah!"

Strange. Takaya had only been taken away by the police a little earlier. Yokomori and his lot couldn't have...

Yuzuru started and turned. The group continued to gloat.

"But you actually lied to the cops about buying drugs from Ougi? Sweeeeeeet. That's hard-core, man. But if they call you, you'd better tell 'em you don't know me!"

"Fuck that Ougi punk, he pisses me off! Serves him right!"

"The cops came over on the double! They probably won't even need to investigate. Mitsui's gang is finished, and Ougi fell with 'em. That's just what we've wanted, isn't it?"

"I'm the one who had to lie, so you guys had better thank me."

Yuzuru's face was unrecognizable. He was so far beyond angry that his eyes were completely frozen over. He growled at their backs, "You there, wait."

Yokomori and the others turned and regarded the frail-looking junior high second-year suspiciously.

"What?!"

Yuzuru glared at them, eyes wide with rage.

The north wind tore past their cheeks.

~~~~~

Takaya's questioning went right past three until almost four.

When the middle-aged detective finally came out of the room, the officer waiting outside hurried over.

"How'd it go?"

"He's one stubborn punk. Didn't confess anything. Looks like this one's going to take a while," he answered, and asked, "How about Mitsui and the others?"

"They're locked up," the officer replied, disgusted. "Still keeping quiet about the last one. They're pretty close-mouthed when it comes to their friends."

"Watching each other's backs? Lovely," he responded bitingly, and

accompanied the officer to Mitsui's cell. Mitsui reclined quietly against the wall within the barred room, as composed as if his arrest meant nothing to him.

"Still keeping quiet, huh, Mitsui?"

"..."

Mitsui turned cold, steady eyes towards him, eyes full of an arrogance that seemed to bore through anyone they looked upon.

"Who's the last LSD seller?"

He didn't respond—not that the detective had expected him to. He looked at Mitsui, then smirked viciously.

"Well, it doesn't really matter. Somebody's already ratted you out."

"?"

Mitsui regarded him suspiciously. The detective took a seat in front of the bars. "That friend of yours, Ougi Takaya. He's the other dealer, isn't he?"

"Ougi...?" Mitsui spoke for the first time, his eyes involuntarily widening as he moved away from the wall. "What...did you say? Ougi? Ougi Takaya?"

"The investigation's already turned him up even if we didn't have it from your mouths. So let's have a confession here. You no longer have any reason to keep your secret."

"This has nothing to do with Ougi!" Mitsui shouted, jerking forward.

"He's got nothing to do with this! He doesn't have any drugs, and he's never sold any! Let Ougi go! He's innocent!"

"Protecting him won't do any good. We already have testimony that he sold drugs."

Rage suffused Mitsui's face. "That's a total lie! Whoever told you that is trying to set him up! Can't you even tell?"

"Nothing you say is going to make a difference. If the last dealer isn't Ougi, then..." The detective's eyes flashed in sly calculation.

"...Tell me who the last seller is, Mitsui."

"...!"

"If you tell us, we'll clear Ougi of all charges. This is dependent on you."

Mitsui pressed his lips tightly together, smoldering with resentment.

The blood vessels at his temple throbbed. The middle-aged detective snorted and left the jail.

(Cowardly fucking asshole...)

He was planning to make a scapegoat out of Takaya even if he was innocent, to use him as a lure to draw the name of the real perpetrator out of Mitsui and the others.

A little while later, Takaya was led into the jail. He looked like he'd been beaten so badly that he couldn't walk on his own. Their eyes met through the bars for an instant as Takaya was supported past him. Even



filled with the hopelessness of knowing that there was no escape, they seethed with hatred.

(Ougi...)

There was the sound of a door opening, followed by the heavy thud of a body falling to the floor. The door closed again, and the cops left the jail.

Mitsui hugged his knees as he brooded.

Christmas Eve. The youths looked up at the night sky through their tiny windows from their cold, cold floors.

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## Frozen Wings Chapter 5: Sand Castle

*"It hurts! Mom, it hurts..."*

He ran crying to his mother where she sat on the beach making a sand-dune, holding out his injured index finger. It was bleeding where he had cut it on a mollusk shell. Sawako smiled into his tear-streaked face, murmuring, "Does it hurt?"

Fighting back fresh tears, he nodded "yeah." Sawako nodded back and kissed his finger. Then she smiled gently.

*"There. All better..."*

It was like magic.

When he'd been little, he had truly believed that his mother's kiss could heal wounds. Because when she kissed him, the pain somehow just went away.

He could still hear the waves. His entire family had gone to the beach that day so long ago, the only time all four of them had gone together, both before and after. Miya had still been a toddler then, and the ocean had scared both of them when they laid eyes on it for the first time. But their father had laughed and called them onto the beach. And there the four of them had built a sand castle together, laughing all the way.

By the time they were getting ready to go home, the rising tide was

already starting to wash away the castle they had worked so hard to build. Takaya desperately tried to protect it from the waves, but he couldn't stop the sand from crumbling apart, little by little... He was powerless against the inexorable waves, and he had cried in angry frustration...

*"There is nothing we can do, Takaya,"* his mother had coaxed, trying to comfort him.

There had been so much sadness in his mother's smile that day as she had turned back at his sobbing cry—*"Why are you leaving?"*

*"There is nothing else I can do, Takaya."*

No, there was. There had to be...! If he tried hard enough, there had to be something. He would be able to save the sand castle from crumbling. He would protect it from the waves!

(It hurts...)

His entire body ached from the adults' punches and kicks. From the bruises and lacerations. He felt feverish. I don't know how to heal myself. I don't know how to stop this pain, Mom!

But his mother was no longer with him. There was no one to heal his wounds. Why did he have to be here alone in this cold, cold room? He ached.

He had no one. Not Miya, not his mother...

Then suddenly, the memory of a smile floated into his mind. Where had it

come from? Why did he long for it so?

The room was so cold... He was turning to ice.

Was there nothing to be done about anything? Did he have no choice but to resign himself to everything? Was that all that the future held?

Would he never be able to stop the ravaging waves? To keep himself from

being worn away?

Oh please, someone, please protect me...

Please save me before I crumble completely away.

Be with me always, share your warmth with me...

This small existence cowering in a jail cell.

Someone, save me...

This room is so cold...

I hurt so much...

Tears overflowed.

(Mom...)

Morning sunlight slanted through the tiny window.

Takaya, wrapped in a blanket, awoke at the sound of the door opening.

"...?"

The detective from yesterday was standing in front of him with the guard. He leveraged himself upright as the detective inhaled slightly and told him, "You can come out, Ougi."

"..."

"You're free to go. You've been cleared of all charges."

Takaya's eyes widened. The middle-aged detective tossed Takaya his coat and hurried him out. Hugging his aching body, still half in doubt, he put on the coat and walked out of the cell with both adults accompanying him. He noticed that Mitsui had disappeared from the cell next to his.

Takaya stopped abruptly.

Mid-way to the entrance, he saw Mitsui coming out of an interrogation room. He scratched his cheek lightly with a cuffed hand and gave Takaya a small smile.

"Yo."

For a moment Takaya was struck dumb. He knew why his charges had been cleared: Mitsui had confessed the name of the last person.

"I blundered. The cops caught me selling drugs."

"You...then..."

"You idiot, don't get me wrong. We only had one bag, and it was hallucinogens. Well whatever; six of one and a half dozen of the other, I guess..."

Takaya's eyes widened. There was a small smile in Mitsui's eyes. The officers led him forward. As they passed each other, he murmured, "...Don't fall..."

Takaya stopped and turned around. The officers led Mitsui down the corridor into the jail. Takaya looked after him wordlessly until he disappeared down the stairs.

In the back portion of the first floor, a section labeled "juvenile department," several young men were receiving a blistering tongue-lashing. A closer look revealed them to be Yokomori and his buddies.

"Why are they..."

"Onii-chan !"

He turned to see Miya flying towards him like a shot from the opposite end of the floor. She threw herself at Takaya and clung to him, as if to declare that she would never be letting him go again. She started crying.

"Miya. I made you worry, didn't I. Sorry."

Miya sobbed, not loosening her hold. He looked up to see Narita Yuzuru standing with Kasai from the Family Court.

"Yokomori and his friends lied to the police. They thought the beating they got was because you told Mitsui. They wanted some revenge too, but

I think they did it more as a sort of a prank. But now, see? They've been really getting it for a while over there."

"Narita—..."

Kasai walked up to him, saying, "Your father is talking to the department chief right now. You can head on home."

"Kasai-san, you came too..."

"You should go home and get those wounds treated. These two didn't sleep a wink last night."

There were bruises on Yuzuru's face as if he'd been punched. Yuzuru noticed him looking and grinned back at him cheerfully. "Oh, this? When I was talking to Yokomori to get him to confess, things got a little out of hand... Nothing major."

"Then you..."

Yuzuru looked down, smiling bashfully, then resolutely looked up again.

"Will you go home now? You didn't get to celebrate Christmas Eve at all. Miya-chan waited all night for you to come back."

"Onii-chan ,

Yuzuru-san is really amazing! Those bad people were really afraid of him. He's really strong! They gave in to him without a fight!"

"..."

Yuzuru smiled at Takaya's surprise. "I'm not that amazing. I just threatened them a little like you do. It worked really well."

If he asked Yokomori and the others they'd probably deny being scared of Yuzuru, so Takaya would never know how terrifying Yuzuru's questioning had been.

For Yuzuru had been the one to persuade Yokomori and the others to tell the police the truth. They had violently resisted, but in the end had finally admitted that the accusations had been groundless. That, along with Mitsui's confession, had cleared Takaya of all charges.

Kasai clapped the Ougi siblings on the shoulders and asked Takaya gravely, "You got those wounds on your face during the interrogation, didn't you? We can press charges against those detectives. Would you like to?"

Takaya looked at Kasai, then past him at the detective from yesterday. He was silent for a moment.

"Let me...go home first and think about it for a little bit."

Miya pulled on Takaya's arm to hurry him along. Yuzuru smiled brightly.

"It's still not too late to celebrate. Today's Christmas, after all. Once we get home, we need to have cake."



Takaya felt his face relaxing out of its stiffness at Yuzuru's guileless smile. A small answering smile appeared at the corners of his bruised lips.

"...Yeah."

The case was finally resolved with the capture of the last dealer on the next day, though the facts coming to light, of drugs being sold to junior high kids, shocked the community and caused a huge uproar within the Board of Education and PTA of every school. But that would come later. The seriousness of the situation, however, perhaps explained the police agency's desperation.

The last person Mitsui had been so desperately protecting had been a man with direct ties to the mafia, an adult who was senior to him in the organization and the only person he would never disobey. Though he would have been flushed out sooner or later, Mitsui's confession had sealed his fate. The others had also been warned not to say anything.

"They refused to tell because they're afraid of what he'll do to them later, right?" Kasai asked Mitsui. They were speaking alone in a room in the juvenile detention center. This was the fifth time he had taken charge of Mitsui, and he was visiting to find out more about the particulars of the case.

"But if you had wanted to, you could have pinned the blame on Takaya-kun to protect him. Why did you confess? You've put yourself in harm's way, haven't you?"

It was a dreary room empty of all but a single chair and desk. Mitsui answered Kasai haltingly, "... I...didn't want him to be involved."

"Takaya-kun?"

"Yeah," Mitsui replied, relief on his face as he gazed towards the window. "In the beginning, I was planning to drag him along with me right to the end. He gave me this cut with his knife when we first met, you know. Nobody had ever touched my face before. Dammit, that pissed me off. That was when I decided I would take him down with me, no matter what."

Mitsui brushed gently against the scar above his eye.

"The more I was around him, the more I wanted to thrust him down so deep, stain him with so much evil that he would never be able to stand up again. I'm not joking."

"... Why?"

Mitsui, leaning back in the pipe chair, suddenly smiled. "Because he reminded me of myself."

"What...?"

"Of the me from a long time ago." Mitsui answered. There was no trace

of malice in his smile. "That's why I wanted to drag him down. Make him walk the same road I did, make him fall until he hits rock bottom and there's no place left to fall. Take him down with me. I resented that even though we're so alike, he could stand again."

Kasai looked at him gently.

"But...you didn't."

Mitsui nodded, murmuring, "Not because I didn't want to, but because I couldn't. Because he reminded me of myself too much... When his eyes flashed like that, he was so like me as a kid. I didn't want to run from myself anymore."

"..."

"He is 'me'. That's why..." —he recalled again the look of Takaya's eyes. "I don't want him to become me," Mitsui concluded, smiling with resignation and mockery at the self which had not been able to stand again after falling, which had fallen deeper and deeper until it had descended to a place without a way back. Perhaps the truth was simply that he wanted to entrust the self he truly wanted to be to Takaya.

Gazing at him, Kasai said gently, "It's certainly not too late for you."

Mitsui looked up abruptly.

There was a quiet smile in the depths of Kasai's eyes.

"It's not too late to change yourself. Stand up again as many times as

you need to. Don't give up even if your weakness makes you fall. If that's what you truly want, I guarantee you'll become the person you want to be one day if you put in the effort. Challenge me as many times as you want to, if you think I'm lying to you."

"..."

"It's much too early for you to give up on yourself or your future."

Mitsui's eyes widened at the sincerity in Kasai's.

"Geez. It always sounds like a lie when people say stuff like that to me," he muttered in confusion, grimacing.

"We're not lying to you," Kasai told the young man straightforwardly. "I do...believe in you."

One day near the end of winter break, Narita Yuzuru looked out his window to see a figure wandering aimlessly back and forth on the road in front of his house. It was a familiar-looking young man wearing a white coat and a hat. Yuzuru immediately sprinted down the stairs and out the house.

"Ougi!"

The young man responded with a curt "Yo." Yuzuru didn't know how long he had been loitering outside the house, but he seemed to have been waiting for Yuzuru to notice him.

"If you're coming to visit, you should just ring the doorbell, geez!"

"Mnn... Actually, I was just passing by," Takaya said, though in fact he'd been in front of the house for close to forty minutes. Yuzuru, more familiar now with Takaya's deposition, declined to comment. But he was rather tempted to test how long Takaya would walk around in front of the house if he didn't come down—next time, maybe?

"Come in. It's cold."

"Ah... No, it's okay..." Takaya hesitated for a moment, then muttered softly, "I was wondering if you'd let me pray at your bird's grave."

Yuzuru's eyes widened. Then he grinned in understanding.

"Sure."

Yuzuru smiled down at Takaya kneeling in front of the small grave in the garden. With his hands pressed together, Takaya asked, "What was her name?"

"Name?" Yuzuru answered, thinking for a moment. "Well, now that you mention it, I guess I never really gave her a name. I just called her Bird-san."

"Idiot! You should've at least given her a name! She was your pet, wasn't she?"



"Sorry," Yuzuru apologized, and Takaya scowled at the blank wooden plaque in annoyance. Both were silent for a moment. Yuzuru suddenly noticed the burn scars on Takaya's left hand.

"It looks like your hand's pretty much healed."

"This?"

"Do they mean something? Those round burns..."

"Idiot. These are tests of courage. You hold a cigarette against your skin and see if you can take it. Don't you even know something like that?!"

Apparently Yuzuru didn't. Nor did he understand why Takaya would want to, but to him the burns seemed like badges of honor.

"You wanna try it?"

"No way. Doesn't it hurt?"

Takaya glared at Yuzuru crossly. "That's why it's called a test of courage!"

Yuzuru started. Now I've made him mad, he thought, gazing at Takaya's back. He let Takaya sulk for a moment, waiting for him to speak.

"I was wondering... why did you chase after me that night?"

That night— Yuzuru knew exactly which. He thought for a moment before answering with a smile. "I guess because I couldn't leave you like that..."

"Why? Did you know that I was gonna take a knife to my old man?"

There was surprise on Yuzuru's face. But his expression softened again, and he finally murmured gently, "No, I didn't know. But..."

"...?"

"But I just can't just leave a wounded creature, I guess?"

Takaya's eyes widened this time. So that was how Yuzuru had seen him that night. Yuzuru smiled innocently and stood. "Aaaah, geez, my foot's asleep."

"Oh, sorry. See you."

"See you'? Er, you're going home already?"

"Of course."

"So, so then why'd you come?"

"To visit the grave, obviously."

Scowling at the standoffish Takaya, Yuzuru declared, "There's an entrance fee for viewing this grave."

"F-fee—?! What the heck?"

"The rule is that anyone who comes to worship at this grave must have some tea inside. Sorry."

"Y-y-y-you! Dammit, Naritaaa!"

"Come on. Come in, Takaya."

Takaya, startled by such familiarity, looked irritated enough to punch him. This was the first time anyone had ever called him by his first name without an honorific. But Yuzuru seemed to have made up his mind

"I can have the privilege, can't I?" he asked, smiling brightly.

Takaya had no resistance left, and felt as if he were getting used to it... He sighed in resignation, but beneath the sigh was a tiny smile.

"Who said you could, idiot?"

Something white landed on his shoulder. Snow was starting to fall again. The snowy season seemed to have arrived in full.

"...It's going to get cold again, hmm?"

They looked up together at the powdered whiteness drifting from the



sky, muffling the sounds of the city and melting as it touched the ground.

Though frozen white clouds covered the sky, neither felt cold.

END

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